

A CRUEL DILEMMA


BY
MARY H. TENNYSON.





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A
CRUEL DILEMMA

BY
MARY H. TENNYSON

AUTHOR OF
"LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY," "FRIEND PERDITUS,"
"PAID IN FULL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



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A CRUEL DILEMMA.



CHAPTER I.

THE garden of Sir Richard Forrest's mansion at Polesworth-on-Thames positively glittered on a typical May-day morning; the flower-beds, surrounded by the fresh green grass, appeared like so many natural gems; and lilac, laburnum, and pink and white hawthorn flourished in such luxuriance, that 'The Lodge,' as the substantial edifice was modestly called, in the spring season was considered one of the show places, by the watermen rowing pleasure parties up the river, which pursued its silvery way at the extremity of Sir Richard Forrest's extensive grounds.

From the river only a glimpse of the old-fashioned

rambling red-brick house could be seen, but the garden, with its wealth of blossoms and magnificent old trees, was like a gorgeous picture framed in by the blue sky; and many a man and woman, condemned to live amidst the dust and smoke of the mighty city so near at hand, would allow an envious sigh to escape them as they gazed upon what seemed a real paradise to eyes that were alternately half blinded with the pitiless glare of the sun upon the pavement, or the density of a London fog.

The lawn, studded with a variety of trees, sloped gradually down to within a few yards of the water, and at the extreme right of Sir Richard's domain, approached by a winding shrubbery pathway, was an ornamental boat-house, at the side of which danced and rocked on the gently undulating water a couple of highly-polished, luxuriantly-cushioned pleasure boats, built upon the most elegant lines, and so light that a woman might manage them with perfect ease.

But the expression of the girl who was seated upon the rustic seat near, in the shade of a mighty oak, seemed scarcely in accord with the genius of

the spring morning, under whose gracious influence the very river seemed to dimple into smiles ; while the birds sang, and the flowers and leaves nodded and saluted each other in the gentle breeze, as though there was abroad a universal spirit of courtesy and lovingkindness, which made even the most stiff-backed among them cast away their pride for the time being, at least, and join in the general endeavour to make the world a very pleasant place to sojourn in.

It was no element of ill-temper, however, which made Ruth Forrest's face out of harmony with her surroundings ; the pucker between the somewhat strongly-marked straight brows indicated a mind ill at ease, and it was not until the wistful hazel eyes, which were gazing so earnestly at the bend of the river, lighted up with a sudden gleam of hope, and the firmly-compressed lips parted in an eager, tender smile, that the charm of her beauty could be fully realized. Then it became evident that, though in her graver moments Sir Richard Forrest's only daughter, and the heiress to his considerable fortune, could appear rather a haughty damsel, with

her direct, brave eyes, her short, well-cut upper lip, and her slightly prominent chin; let her heart be but stirred, and it would be difficult to imagine a more lovable maiden.

“Why doesn’t he come? He said he would be early this morning,” she murmured, with a sigh. “Now Miss Harding is gone, there is nobody for me to confide in but Jack, and I am so terribly uneasy about father. It is ever since he went to Folkestone for that day that he has been so strange.”

A step in the shrubbery behind her caused Ruth to turn her head, and, with a start, she rose and advanced to meet her father, looking at him with an uneasy air which was plainly evident to the Baronet, who commenced in somewhat peevish tones,—

“I couldn’t find you anywhere, Ruth; you are on the look-out for Jack, as usual, I presume. Now, my dear, sit down again, and for goodness sake don’t stare at me like that; I suppose it is the absence of my beard which astonishes you so much.”

“It is rather startling, certainly,” she faltered.

“Brown has been advising me to have it off ever so long,” the Baronet replied, his swarthy wrinkled face flushing slightly, “and I told him he might do as he liked this morning. He says he thinks I look ten years younger without it.”

“It is possible that you do,” his daughter responded doubtfully.

“I am sure I do,” he interrupted hastily; “but I want to talk to you on other matters now. Sit down and give me your best attention.”

But though the alteration in Sir Richard Forrest’s appearance did not seem to impress his daughter favourably, to an impartial beholder there would have been no doubt that since the visit to Folkestone, which had given Ruth food for so much reflection, the Baronet had improved considerably so far as the outward man went, for though the removal of his untidy coarse grey beard did not render him more youthful-looking, he now paid ordinary attention to the cleanliness and neatness of his clothes; while in the old days, the front and wristbands of his shirt were seldom free from splashes of ink, and he had been even known to go

out for a walk with a countenance which bore unmistakable evidence of his literary occupations, and his indifference to the conventionalities.

Sir Richard's wife had died six years before, when Ruth was barely twelve years old; but the girl was tall and intelligent beyond her age, and the mother, lacking the society of her husband, with whom it was a rule to bury himself in his study for the greater part of each day, made a companion of her young daughter, instilling into her mind from the first the fact that her father was an enormously clever man; so clever, indeed, that all every-day matters were beneath his notice, and that it was the duty of those connected with him to save him from every possible annoyance, and see that he did not injure himself by over-application to his studies.

On her deathbed she called Ruth to her and solemnly gave her father into her charge. "He has every sense but common sense," she said, "but geniuses never have common sense—take care of him, Ruth; make him go out, do not forget; he would sit over his books until he blinded himself; and see that he eats his dinner; many a time he

would have forgotten it altogether unless I had reminded him of it."

But although Lady Forrest was a very capable woman, in respect to her husband she had certainly not displayed quite the average powers of penetration, and it was a surprise and a shock to people in general when the beautiful girl of two-and-twenty, fell in love with a plain, high-shouldered man, many years her own senior, who appeared to have nothing beyond his position and a certain reputation for scientific knowledge to recommend him.

Probably the explanation of the singular match was that Ruth's mother had an exaggerated reverence for studies which were beyond her own comprehension, and when she made the acquaintance of Sir Richard Forrest, she fancied in the unkempt, ugly, prematurely old man, whose eyes were always lifted to the clouds, she had found a very *rara avis* of learning.

Lady Forrest, however, made a great mistake in one matter; Sir Richard's mind was by no means so powerful as she imagined, but he was, notwith-

standing his very plain face and ill-formed figure, morbidly anxious for admiration, and noticing, even as a little child, that his love of reading was spoken of with respect by his elders, he determined from a young boy to cultivate the reputation of brain-power; and although his career at school and college was no more than ordinarily successful, his studious demeanour deceived the majority of his companions, and it was said among them that Dick Forrest had a lot more in him than ever came out.

These early habits became in time a second nature, and at forty years of age, when he wedded his young bride, Sir Richard Forrest, by dint of continual reading, had in reality amassed a considerable amount of information. His untidy, hermit-like customs had also increased upon him, and after his marriage, finding the attention and devotion of his young wife very soothing to the vanity that was still hidden in his innermost nature, he made no effort to improve in these particulars.

He liked to be coaxed to go out into the sunlight, and to eat his dinners, and to feel her soft fingers arranging his necktie while she looked up

into his face with her loving reverential eyes. In his way he was a kind, loyal husband ; he loved his wife, and perceiving in her admiration for himself an evidence of unusual intellect, he honestly believed that the world did not contain her equal.

There was this inconsistency in him, however : he was a man who would not have told a lie or willingly deceived any one, and yet he was in truth an arrant humbug. He was lazy as well as constitutionally inert, and he liked to sit in his luxurious library, dozing over his books, and occasionally scribbling in his enormous note-book ; but he was by no means so absorbed as he pretended to be, and though he made a rule of responding to his wife's summons to go out, or ride, or drive, with a patient sigh, in his heart he was glad of the interruption, and it is quite certain that had she ever been late in calling him to dress for dinner he would have been quite aware of the fact.

They had been married fifteen years when Lady Forrest died, and Ruth took upon herself the solemn responsibility of looking after her father ; and every day that the sun shone or the wind was not in the

east, when her morning studies with her governess were over, she would knock timidly at the library door, and apologetically and humbly entice Sir Richard from his pursuit of knowledge.

She was so thoroughly imbued with her mother's spirit with regard to her father's extraordinary intellectual powers, and absorption in his work, that she did not guess as the years went forward that Sir Richard was getting a little weary of his scientific researches, and, in fact, had arrived at a time of life when he began to long for a little change.

"After all," he would murmur sometimes, "I know as much as I care to know, and at sixty years of age one begins to crave for rest."

Altogether there were many slight indications that the sage was only in want of an excuse to give up his secluded habits, and mingle with the world, but Ruth had been taught by her mother that society was too painfully frivolous for a man of her father's depth of character, and therefore that she must content herself to do without it, finding her pleasures in her garden, and the river, and her study of art, of which she was passionately fond.

It is probable, however, having an acuter intelligence than her mother, that Ruth would, in time, have perceived the real state of the case, but, unfortunately for her relations with her father, not long after her seventeenth birthday, a new interest came into her life.

The son of an old school friend of her mother's, whose parents had died some years before, suddenly appeared upon the scene, and when Ruth went to her room that night, after an evening of almost bewildering happiness, she threw herself on her knees by the side of her bed, and buried her blushing, radiant face in her hands, murmuring ecstasically,—

“Oh, mother, I want you so badly! If I could only lean my head upon your breast and talk to you to-night! What does he think of me, I wonder, or is he thinking of me at all?”

And then remembering the young man's clasp of the hand when he had left her, his glistening eyes, and his earnest request that he might come again on the morrow, she answered her own question to her entire satisfaction, while Jack Rathbone, feeling

the train far too prosaic a method of transport under the circumstances, stepped out manfully in the direction of town, heedless of the lengthy walk which lay before him, his heart fluttering delightfully.

“And I used to declare love at first sight was all nonsense,” he said softly. “Well, perhaps it is, as a rule; mine may well be the exceptional case which proves the rule, for where could you find another girl like Ruth Forrest? By Jove! she’s glorious! She looks as if she had a will of her own, but if so, all the better. I like a woman with a spirit, so long,” continued Mr. Jack Rathbone, with a twinkle in his eye, “so long as her spirit bends to mine; and Ruth’s would do that if she loved me, and she *shall* love me. I have more than a year before I go away, and then I need only stay for a few months. But, good Heavens! perhaps she cares for some one else!”

The young man stopped a minute and tried to look dismal, but presently he broke into an unaffected happy laugh.

“It won’t do, Jack Rathbone,” he cried aloud; “you are a humbug, my lad! You feel sure she

doesn't love anybody else ; I don't say she cares for you yet, you conceited dog, but I'd back you for having made a favourable impression and being first in the field."

And then Jack walked on again, his mind full of joyous excitement, and his handsome fair face wearing an unusually tender expression.

CHAPTER II.

JACK RATHBONE came to 'The Lodge' again the next afternoon, and having his time entirely at his own disposal, found no difficulty in framing excuses for visiting the shrine of his idol almost every day.

Sir Richard Forrest had a sincere liking for the young man, whose fresh, unconventional notions of life were as refreshing to the weary recluse as a mountain breeze; and approving entirely of his circumstances—for, in another eighteen months, when he would attain the age of twenty-five, Jack was to come into a considerable fortune invested in a thriving fur business in Montreal, and a gold mine in Australia—Sir Richard was by no means displeased when the careful Miss Harding called his attention to the fact that there evidently was a warm attachment between the handsome young visitor and Ruth. The Baronet therefore threw no hindrance in

the way of the lovers, and in six months he gave his consent to their betrothal, merely insisting that Jack should not marry until he came into his fortune.

For two years Jack Rathbone had been travelling about Europe, but now he settled at a London hotel, and gave himself up to the pleasures of Ruth's society, until the time should arrive when it would be necessary for him to go out to Canada and Australia to take possession of his belongings on attaining his legal majority. He did not worry himself with plans for the future during this period of bliss, but he had signified briefly to Sir Richard that having no family ties in the new world, his father and mother having been English people, it was his intention to realize his money as quickly as might be, and to invest it in England, so that there might be no need for his living abroad.

But though the Baronet was perfectly satisfied with the course things had taken, it must be admitted it was rather a pang to him to perceive that he no longer monopolized his daughter's care and thought. His wants were still attended to with the utmost regularity, nor, however great the induce-

ment, did Ruth once omit to come with her soft knock to the library door and invite him to join their riding or boating party ; but he would sigh often and throw his books impatiently from him, when he found how much more readily she accepted his excuses now, and how perfectly content the lovers were with old Miss Harding as a third in their various expeditions. To accede to Ruth's invitations at once, however, was, to Sir Richard, really a matter of impossibility ; all his life he had required coaxing, even to take his pleasures, and he had come to think he had a right to expect coaxing, and that those who did not treat him in this way neglected him to some extent.

Altogether, therefore, the sage was not happy. By his own act he was, to a certain extent, under petticoat government, and he had not objected to this so long as his womenkind devoted themselves solely to ruling him ; but now he began to find that to be managed without being worshipped was not exactly an enjoyable condition, and he became fretful and peevish, and his sallow face grew so alarmingly yellow that Ruth summoned the doctor, and

insisted on dieting him vigorously, until at length a day arrived when his irritation and impatience reached a culminating point.

He was sitting in his study, filled with a positive aversion to his books, longing for an opportunity of escaping from them without too great a sacrifice of his dignity, when he heard the horses brought up to the hall door, and immediately afterwards came Ruth's familiar knock.

Sir Richard raised his head to stare through his spectacles at the bright laughing face, and the graceful figure, which showed to the fullest advantage in the perfectly-fitting dark blue riding habit.

"Are you going out, Ruth?" he asked somewhat wistfully.

"Yes, dear," she answered gaily, "but I shall not ask you to come with us to-day."

"No, no, I suppose not," he replied slowly, passing his hand over the page of the book.

"Miss Harding says she is certain it will pour in less than half an hour. Jack and I don't care for rain, but it would be quite another thing for you. Now, father, I have told cook to send you up your

soup at twelve, and I have ordered some fish for your lunch; you won't take any pepper with your soup, will you, dear? I promised Doctor Saunders that you should not. Good-bye! I wish it were finer, for your sake, though I daresay you would rather sit over your books."

She kissed him lightly and closed the door.

Listening intently, Sir Richard heard the merry voices die suddenly away, as the horses broke into a quick canter; and then he shut up his volume with a violent snap, and began walking nervously up and down the room, muttering under his breath,—

"I don't see why it should hurt me any more than them to get wet; it's all rubbish, the doctor and Ruth between them would make a perfect fool of me. At sixty a man doesn't care to coddle, and whatever I look like, I am only sixty. I am sick of this sort of thing; Jack's a nice fellow, but love-making is only interesting to the principals. By Jove!" he went on, walking more quickly, and raising his head with some show of energy—"if I only had an excuse, how I should like to get away for a bit. How many years is it, I wonder, since I've

been away by myself? Not since I was married, I know."

He seated himself again, and once more took up his book, but he laid it down in an instant, and continued thinking aloud,—

"I've a great mind to run down to the seaside, for a week or two. Ruth is a good girl, a dear good girl, but she hasn't so much tact as her mother had, and I am just a trifle tired of being treated like a child. I really should like to give them the slip for a few days. If Ruth knew I thought of going away alone there would be such an awful fuss, and I'm tired to death of fussing. Perhaps, after a complete change, I might come back to my books with renewed zest; just now I feel inclined to make a bonfire of them."

The sun shining into the room interrupted him here, and he gave vent to a short, almost bitter laugh.

"That doesn't look much like rain, any way," he muttered; "they didn't want me, that's the fact."

For another ten minutes he sat there, growing more impatient and restless each moment, and then

he rang his bell sharply, and ordered his valet to be sent to him. In a minute the man appeared.

"Pack my trunk," Sir Richard said, curtly, "I am going away for a couple of weeks."

"Going away, sir?" the valet stammered, in great surprise.

"Yes, now, directly," his master cried impatiently.

"And am I to accompany you, sir?" Brown inquired. He had been in Sir Richard's service for ten years, and such an event as his master's going away by himself was quite unprecedented.

"No, I shall not require you. Now go about your business, I am in a hurry. Tell Miss Harding I wish to speak with her."

The staid old governess was really alarmed when she learnt that Sir Richard Forrest was going out of town then and there, without even waiting to bid his daughter good-bye, giving only the unsatisfactory explanation that he was not feeling very well, and that he remembered many years ago having been ordered to the seaside under similar circumstances.

But Sir Richard declined to listen to any expostu-

lations from her. There was a feverish impatience upon him to be gone, with which he did not attempt to wrestle, and he felt that to encounter his daughter's gentle air of authority at that moment would be more than he could endure. Therefore he turned a deaf ear to the old lady's remonstrances ; and merely condescending to drink his soup in deference to Ruth's wishes, in less than an hour from the moment of making up his mind, he sank back in the corner of the railway carriage *en route* for London, murmuring with a sigh of profound relief,—

“ By Jove ! I feel just like a schoolboy off to see the world ! Hullo ! it's raining now ! The lovers will get drenched to a certainty ; and there's a flash of lightning too ! Well, Jack will take care of Ruth ; they will shelter somewhere, and as for me, I like the excitement.”

The storm raged fiercely for six hours or more, but Ruth and Jack, having no inkling how much their absence from home at that time would affect their future, were not at all inclined to complain on that account.

They were perfectly happy as they stood drying their clothes before a roaring fire in the kitchen of a wayside inn six miles away from "The Lodge," and at the moment the runaway Sir Richard took his seat in the train, and the first flash of lightning occurred, Ruth looked up into her lover's face, saying with a merry laugh,—

"Why, Jack, I believe you are frightened of the storm, after all ; you look quite grave and anxious."

He put his arm round her, altogether ignoring the presence of the old landlady who considerably hustled about at the other end of the large kitchen, pretending not to notice the tall handsome couple.

"I've been in an American forest and seen trees struck with lightning within twenty yards, so a storm in a teacup like this doesn't seem much to me," he answered, smiling ; "but I'm afraid your father will think I take no care of my treasure. I ought not to have brought you out on such a day."

"Don't worry yourself, dear," she said cheerfully ; "I shall not catch cold, I never do, I am really quite uninterestingly healthy ; and as for father, he won't know whether it rains or not ; I don't believe he

would notice an earthquake unless it tumbled him off his chair, when he is among his books."

"Then I am quite satisfied," the young man replied, "and I hope it will pour for hours ; then we should be obliged to have a *tête-à-tête* dinner here, which would be awfully good fun. I wonder what they would give us ?"

"Eggs and bacon, I imagine," Ruth responded ; "according to novelists, that's what the bill of fare always shrinks to in these places. But, seriously, dear, I hope we shall be able to get home to dinner ; I don't believe father would eat anything if I were not there to persuade him."

Ruth would have been considerably surprised could she have seen her father, a few hours later, sitting down with a hearty appetite to a cosy six-o'clock meal at one of the principal Folkestone hotels, and her astonishment and dismay when she reached home at hearing of his sudden departure would have been increased a hundredfold could she have witnessed a little scene which was being at that moment enacted on the Folkestone Pier, in which scene Sir Richard figured prominently.

Refreshed with wine and food, at seven o'clock the Baronet emerged from his hotel. The sun had set, but the sky was full of a gorgeous afterglow ; and though the April evening was somewhat chilly, Sir Richard felt strangely light-hearted and comfortable, as, with a good cigar between his lips, and his shrivelled yellow hands in the pockets of his fur-lined overcoat, he strolled down the pier to see the Boulogne packet come in, his head more erect than usual, and his dim eyes wide open in an almost eager search after amusement.

Presently a little commotion attracted his attention, and pressing forward to ascertain the cause, he saw that a lady had slipped and fallen on the gangway connecting the vessel with the pier. The officials were assisting the lady to rise as Sir Richard drew near, but when she attempted to take a step forward she uttered a smothered cry of pain, and lifting her head, revealed to the interested baronet the most lovely face he had ever seen in his life, even though the red lips were drawn with pain, and the violet eyes swimming with tears.

The lady was quite young, three or four-and-

twenty apparently, and, although her trim tailor-made costume showed that her figure was singularly graceful and well-proportioned, she was very much below the usual height ; her hair was of the lightest possible shade of gold, and altogether, with her delicate fair complexion, she might have posed as an ideal Titania, so fragile and fairy-like was she.

"I cannot walk, I'm afraid," she faltered, addressing the official to whose arm she was clinging. "What shall I do?"

Sir Richard, who was thrilling with sympathy, grew hot with anger when the man replied, somewhat carelessly,—

"You must try and move off the gangway, please ; the passengers cannot leave the vessel while you stay here."

"Give me your arm, then," the lady said, "I will try what I can do."

But while the ticket collector hesitated, being in truth unable to leave his post, Sir Richard, casting away his cigar, came forward.

"Allow me the honour of assisting you, madam," he said, lifting his hat with quite a courtly air. "I

feel disgraced as an Englishman that you should have had to ask in vain."

The official shrugged his shoulders, and gazed down at the ill-assorted couple with what was almost a smile of amusement; but when the fair-haired lady looked up piteously into Sir Richard's face the old man experienced quite a novel and delightful sensation. His wife and daughter both being his superior in height by a couple of inches, it was altogether new and pleasant to the round-shouldered, dwarfish man to be literally looked up to.

"You are very good, sir," she answered gratefully; "perhaps, with your help, I could manage to get on to the pier."

Sir Richard advanced his arm eagerly, and the lady, placing her tiny hand upon it, made another attempt to move forward. The attempt was useless, however; she stopped short, suddenly, and Sir Richard, peering into her face through his spectacles, felt his heart throb with sympathy as he saw a clear crystal tear running down the soft peach-like cheeks.

Quite stirred, he withdrew his arm from her hand, and placing it round the fairy-like figure, with a murmured apology, lifted her, not without a considerable effort, across the gangway, and helped her to sit down upon some luggage that stood there.

The lady was, apparently, too well bred to take any notice of his breathless condition after his act of gallantry, and she was still murmuring her thanks when Sir Richard felt himself tapped upon the shoulder, and turning round, in some annoyance, discovered an acquaintance of his standing at his elbow. At any time this man's society was uncongenial to the old Baronet, but at this moment it was particularly unwelcome.

"Sir Richard Forrest!" he cried. "I fancied I couldn't be mistaken; who would have thought of seeing you here, under such interesting circumstances too! Is your daughter with you? No! you don't say so! What, is there nobody to look after you? Well, keep your eyes open, or you'll go walking off the end of the pier one day, and there will be a splendid sensational case for the papers.

Melancholy death of an English baronet through preoccupation of brain, eh? Why, your poor dear wife used to say, in the good old days, that you were not fit to cross the road by yourself. I say, will you introduce me to your friend? No; well, all right, I'm only chaffing. Good-bye; I'm off to town now."

With a hasty nod Sir Richard turned his back on his boisterous offensive interlocutor, and found that the young lady was still sitting where he had left her, occupied in tying her handkerchief tightly round the injured ankle; but on offering to collect her luggage he discovered that, with the exception of the small hand-bag which she carried, she had none with her, the rest having gone on the previous afternoon with the friends with whom she was to have travelled, if she had not been most unfortunately delayed, at the last moment, for another day in Boulogne.

"At least, let me call a cab for you, then," Sir Richard persisted, "or, perhaps, a Bath-chair will shake you less. Which hotel are you staying at?"

His companion hesitated a minute, and then she said,—

“I am not staying here, I must go on to town to-night.”

“But that is perfectly impossible, my dear madam,” he cried, eagerly; “the pain you would suffer would throw you into a fever.”

“Nevertheless, it is absolutely necessary,” she replied, lifting her eyes to his, and making a futile effort to rise to her feet.

Sir Richard Forrest grew quite excited over her brave disregard of pain. Such powers of endurance and determination were doubly engaging when united with such a fragile appearance, and such an appealing and trustful manner.

“You cannot stand even,” he persisted; “you really must stay here to-night and see a doctor.”

Once more she hesitated, in great embarrassment, and then she suddenly lifted her long-lashed violet eyes, and gazed earnestly into the ugly wrinkled face.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said, after a pause; “I am really afraid I could not bear the journey, my foot is terribly painful.”

"I was sure of it," he answered. "You are very courageous, but your face shows that you are suffering."

"My difficulty is this," she continued, lowering her eyes; "it is an awkward matter to mention, but you have been so very kind, I feel if I did not ask your advice it would really show an ungracious spirit."

Sir Richard drew himself up, and his plain face beamed with satisfaction. This was a very charming young woman, indeed; nobody ever asked his advice on every-day matters at home.

"Any advice that I can give I assure you is at your service," he murmured.

"Well, then, this is my position. Beyond my railway ticket to London I have not five shillings in my pocket, so that to go to an hotel and consult a doctor is not so easy a matter as it seems to you."

"My dear madam," the delighted Baronet cried, "pray, pray don't let that disturb you for a moment; you would indeed have done me an injustice if you had not explained matters to me. Look upon me as your banker until you can

rejoin your friends, or they can come to you. I shall feel it a privilege to be of even this slight assistance to you."

Saying which, Sir Richard beckoned to a Bath-chair man, and having lifted his fair charge in, ordered that the little cavalcade should proceed to the hotel at which he himself was staying; then laying his hand on the side of the chair, contrived, with immense difficulty, to keep up with the man's somewhat inconveniently rapid mode of progression.

Arrived at the hotel, Sir Richard confided the interesting sufferer to the charge of the manager's wife, and then proceeded to summon the doctor, and to despatch a telegram addressed to Herbert Westall, Esq., 18, Swan Street, Hampstead, which ran,—

"Am detained in Folkestone to-night. Will write to-morrow. ARABELLA WESTALL."

All the way back to the hotel the Baronet pondered over the question as to what relationship existed between Arabella and Herbert Westall, and,

his curiosity being strongly excited, it was somewhat tantalizing to find that in his absence the doctor had visited the young lady, and ordered her off to bed at once.

“Well, I shall see her to-morrow, no doubt,” Sir Richard murmured to himself. “She is a most delightful little woman, whoever she is. By Jove! I haven’t felt so well for years. I do believe the air of Folkestone is unusually bracing; I feel ten years younger than I did this morning. I’ll go and have a game of billiards, that is, if I can see to play. My eyes are very queer, considering that I’m not an old man, after all.”

Sir Richard found he could see sufficiently well, and it was twelve o’clock before he retired to his bed, glowing with satisfaction with himself and the world in general.

CHAPTER III.

THE next day the mysterious but beautiful lady was too unwell to leave her bed, but Sir Richard inquired for her at the door, and presented her, through the chambermaid, with a lovely bunch of early roses, which she acknowledged so gratefully and in such a sweet voice, it needed not her assurance that she was very much better, and hoped to be on the sofa the following day and able to thank him personally for his great kindness, to send him away in the best of spirits.

He was up betimes the following morning, but it was twelve o'clock before a waiter informed him that the lady in No. 13 would like to see him, if he were disengaged. In a little flutter of excitement he mounted the stairs, and, knocking at the door, heard the sweet voice desire him to come in.

Eagerly he entered, but he had not taken two

steps before he stopped abruptly. His interesting acquaintance, looking more lovely than ever, despite her pale face, was lying upon the sofa, with one of his roses in the bosom of her dress, and by the window stood a tall, sallow-complexioned man, who appeared to have just come off a journey.

Seeing Sir Richard hesitate, the young lady stretched out her tiny white hand towards him.

"I am so glad to see you again," she said, softly. "I am afraid the pain I suffered the other evening made me accept your great kindness almost ungraciously. Let me thank you now most sincerely, and let me also introduce to you my cousin—I had almost said my brother, for we were brought up together like brother and sister—my cousin, Herbert Westall."

Unconsciously the Baronet heaved a sigh of relief, and the immediate smoothing out of the wrinkles in his forehead, which the sight of the stranger had occasioned, were not lost upon the fragile little lady who lay upon her sofa

watching the two men with her lustrous soft eyes.

Sir Richard clasped Herbert Westall's hand warmly, thinking to himself as he did so that, considering the near relationship between the two, there was a singular dissimilarity between the cousins. The young man was tall and ungainly, his features were clumsy, his complexion sallow, and his small brown eyes had a nervous habit of avoiding those of the person with whom he was conversing, while the lady's were large, and rested upon her companion's with a gentle candour that was particularly interesting. Their voices, too, were very unlike, his being harsh and unmusical; but there was one point of resemblance between the two which Sir Richard noted; they both had a slight peculiarity of accent; but, while in her case there was something attractive even in that, in Herbert Westall it appeared unpleasing and unrefined.

His words were all that they should be, however, if his manner was awkward and ill at ease; but it is possible that his very awkwardness argued favourably for him with the Baronet, for Sir Richard

Forrest had not the reputation of being genial with strangers as a rule, and in this case he was quite hearty in his assurances that he had been already overthanked, and that he should take it as a favour if they would not burden him further with gratitude which he did not in the least deserve, as any one would gladly have done the same in his position.

The two young people glanced at each other meaningly, as the aged-looking Baronet seated himself in the low wicker chair, which the lady indicated to him, his stiff joints occasioning him considerable inconvenience in doing so; but after allowing him a minute to recover himself, the lady fixed her eyes on him again and said with a soft sigh,—

“My cousin and I appreciate your goodness all the more, sir, because we have not found people over here very kind as a rule.”

“Indeed,” Sir Richard replied, much interested, but too gentlemanly to ask questions; “I am sorry to hear that.”

“My cousin and I are Australians,” the lady con-

tinued. "I dare say you have noticed our colonial accent?"

"I have noticed nothing unpleasant, believe me," the Baronet interrupted, eagerly.

"Ah, well, you are too polite to say so, but people are not all so considerate. I have found it a great disadvantage to me already."

"Might I ask how, without being unduly curious?" Sir Richard said, with old-fashioned stiffness, displaying his prominent teeth in a smile which made his yellow parchmenty skin a positive lacework of wrinkles.

"Certainly you may. My cousin and I are orphans, and have no brothers and sisters—in fact we may be said to be alone in the world. Until eighteen months ago we were well off, but then the bank in which our money was invested broke."

"You remember the smash of the United Mercantile in 1889, I daresay?" Herbert Westall interrupted, pulling his coarse dark moustache nervously, and fixing his eyes on the Baronet's waistcoat.

"I did hear of it," Sir Richard assented, having

the vaguest possible remembrance of the occurrence.

“Well, we had to pay up our shares, and the end of it was we were left in very queer streets.”

Here the lady took up the recital again, much to Sir Richard’s satisfaction.

“To make a long story short,” she continued, “we determined to come to England, as we had an uncle here, who, we thought, might be inclined to help us. He had been dead for six weeks when we arrived; and has left his money to strangers. Since then we have been trying in vain to get employment, Herbert as a clerk, and I as a governess. That is where my colonial accent is against me. We fancied we saw an opening in Boulogne, but that, too, has turned out unsatisfactorily. However, I don’t at all despair; things will come right in the end.”

“You are very brave,” murmured Sir Richard, approvingly. “You ought to succeed, indeed.”

“Well, you see, I have a sanguine disposition; unfortunately, poor Herbert has not, to the same

extent," she went on, with a momentary frown at her nervous-looking cousin, which was too rapid to attract the attention of the slow-sighted Baronet. "I believe that often circumstances which appear most unfortunate are for the best after all. I was greatly disappointed at the Boulogne failure, and when I fell and sprained my ankle, I really thought things looked very black indeed, but, after all, I cannot regret it. I have recovered quickly," she continued, with a little falter; "and when one is friendless in a strange country, it is comforting to meet with such generous and disinterested kindness as yours, sir. It revives our faith in human nature generally, and when we have the battle of life to fight such faith is very consoling."

Sir Richard's ugly face positively glowed with pleasure, but the lady's next words banished all the smiles from his countenance.

"I am going up to town with Herbert this afternoon, by the 3.30 train," she said.

"But does the doctor agree to that?" the Baronet cried.

"Well, no, I cannot say he does," she replied

with rather a piteous smile; "but he won't know until I am gone. I believe I am stronger than he thinks me; I can stand and walk a few steps. Any way, I must go, so I had better make the best of it."

Sir Richard was very warm in his expostulations, but presently he stopped, perceiving that the lady seemed very embarrassed, and was gazing appealingly at her cousin, who, turning his face to the window, said abruptly,—

"I will be candid with you, sir; we cannot afford to stay here, and my cousin's railway ticket is not available after to-day; these are sordid considerations, I know, but she and I agree that any personal inconvenience is preferable to incurring expenses which we cannot defray, except by positively crippling our resources.

Sir Richard's yellow countenance beamed with sympathy as he proposed that the two young people should do him the honour of remaining where they were as his guests until the lady's recovery was complete; but this they declined firmly, though Arabella Westall's voice trembled, and the violet eyes were

very dewy and soft as she thanked him for his generous and hospitable offer.

Soon after this the Baronet took his leave of the young pair; but it would seem that the air of Folkestone had suddenly lost its bracing qualities, since Sir Richard could not eat his lunch, and when Herbert Westall appeared upon the platform at the station, tenderly supporting his limping cousin, the first person that his eyes encountered was Sir Richard Forrest, who stood at the door of a first-class carriage, upon the window of which was stuck a label with the word "engaged."

Eagerly the old man advanced to meet them.

"I am going to town, too," he said, "and I have engaged the whole of this carriage; you will pain me if you refuse me the pleasure of your company."

There were tears in Arabella Westall's eyes as she raised them to his; but she did not speak, she left the audible thanks to her cousin. It is probable, however, the little pressure which she bestowed upon the Baronet's hand was more eloquent than any words would have been.

When Sir Richard Forrest reached his home, having been away one day only, he was warmly received by Ruth, who was curious to learn how it happened, that having benefited so greatly in so short a time, he should so much have curtailed his visit; but when, being considerably at a loss for a reason, he had declared that he felt lonely by himself, and had missed her, her heart quite bounded with pleasure.

Coming down ready for dinner, she found Jack alone in the drawing-room, and told that young man with a rosy blush on her cheek, and a very tender light in her eyes, that for the future he must be content with less of her attention; for she feared she had neglected her father rather lately, and he had just heaped coals of fire on her head.

But her smiling threats did not dismay her stalwart lover.

“I am not afraid,” he said, tenderly, “but give me just one kiss, so that I may have strength to endure my altered circumstances.”

Ruth raised her face frankly, and he pressed his

lips to hers, then she continued, while she played with the flower in his buttonhole,—

“I shall take father to Folkestone myself, next week, Jack ; just think, although the air was doing him so much good, he would not stay because I was not there to look after him. I was quite touched when he said so. You don’t mind my taking him to Folkestone, do you, Jack ? ”

“ No, my darling,” Jack replied, with a twinkle in his eye ; “ take him where you like ; as you say, I must make up my mind to give up some of my rights in your society to the Baronet.”

Ruth sighed and moved away, her duty to her father appeared a little harder at that moment.

“ Jack,” she murmured, “ I wonder you ever came to care for me ; I am afraid you think I am a horribly managing creature.”

“ My dear love ! ” the young man expostulated, putting his arm round her again.

“ I am sure you do,” she continued, in great distress. “ Why did you smile just now when I spoke of taking father out of town ? ”

“ Because it seemed to me such a curious method

of expression, considering your relative ages," Jack replied, candidly.

"But I cannot bear you should think I want to manage my father; women who order men about are terrible creatures," she cried, excitedly; "Jack, this position has been forced upon me, it is not of my own seeking; it would be the greatest comfort to me if he would exert his authority over me, sometimes. Oh, Jack, I feel the burden of responsibility that my mother laid upon me very heavily."

"Never mind, Ruth," the young man murmured, gently. "Presently you will have to put up with a husband's authority, don't forget that; and, after all, a man of your father's advanced age does want some one to think and plan for him."

"He is not so very old, Jack," Ruth remonstrated.

"Well, dear, it depends what you call old," Jack replied, with a laugh; "in the ancient Biblical days, he would have been considered a youngster, no doubt; but in these degenerate times, when a man reaches seventy-five, or thereabouts, you ought not to deny him the respect due to his years."

“Seventy-five!” cried Ruth. “What are you talking about, Jack? Father was only sixty last birthday. Do you think he looks as old as that?”

“Well, dear,” the young man responded, “he certainly looks considerably older than seventy, but, after all, what does that matter so long as his brain’s all right? Your father is awfully clever. As for the Folkestone idea, it is a splendid one, because,” he whispered, bending his head to hers,—“because there I shall be able to take up my abode under the same roof as my darling. Ruth, your father does not require you half as much as I do; but is it possible that you don’t see I love you all the better for your devotion to him? Why, you seem to me like a ministering angel in the house. Come, Ruth, smile again, I cannot bear to see your sweet face so grave.”

Ruth was consoled, but she was puzzled when the Baronet evinced a decided objection to her Folkestone scheme, though she observed with great satisfaction that he was unusually bright, and ate with a good appetite.

A little circumstance which happened during the

evening, however, caused her some slight annoyance and uneasiness, not so much on its own account, as because it exhibited her father in an altogether unfamiliar aspect.

It had been the Baronet's custom to sit dozing over his wine for an hour or so after Jack joined the ladies, but on this occasion he had risen from the table with his guest, and going straight to the drawing-room, had discovered his daughter reading, and Miss Harding, Ruth's *ci-devant* governess, comfortably sleeping. The entrance of the gentlemen woke the elder lady, who was so dismayed at being caught in such an undignified attitude, that she fled out of the room in most ungraceful haste, while the Baronet frowned, and Ruth laughed merrily.

"Don't look so solemn, father," she said; "poor Miss Harding! she didn't expect you for another hour. However, she will soon get over the shock."

Sir Richard did not reply at once, but when he had seated himself, he said slowly, with a curious air of deliberation which did not fail to attract his daughter's notice,—

“I cannot agree with you in treating this matter as a joke, Ruth.”

“But, father dear,” she exclaimed, in astonishment, “you really cannot think it serious; Miss Harding always has her little nap after dinner, doesn’t she, Jack?”

“Bless her heart, yes!” replied Jack, heartily, “and very good taste she shows.”

The Baronet, however, did not smile, and Ruth going to him, put one of her soft white arms round his neck, and kissing the lined forehead, murmured archly,—

“Do you know, father, I fancy Miss Harding imagines she is following your good example, and that while she is having a comfortable forty winks here you are doing the same in the dining-room, but to-day you stole a march on us.”

But Sir Richard was not to be coaxed into a good humour.

“What I am in the habit of doing does not affect the case at all, my dear. I am not supposed to act in the capacity of cheerful companion to a young girl. The fact of the matter is, Miss Harding is

too old for her post," he continued pompously ; "I have thought so for some time, now I am certain of it ; I shall have to pension her off, I can't have you moped to death with a dull old woman."

"But, father, I love her dearly," Ruth cried, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks glowing, "she is not in the least dull, is she, Jack ? She only gets a little sleepy after dinner."

"I think she's a splendid old lady," Jack declared ; "I do, indeed, sir."

"That's possible, Mr. Rathbone," the Baronet responded stiffly ; "but you are not the best judge in this matter. Ruth wants some one to play and sing with her, and not an old lady who can't keep awake five minutes together."

"But you know I cannot sing, and I'm not particularly fond of the piano," Ruth argued ; "and she is a splendid draughtswoman, and paints beautifully, and painting is more to me than all the music in the world."

"You don't require her instruction in painting any longer," Sir Richard continued curtly ; "she told me herself that you far eclipsed her already,

and I cannot allow that proficiency in Art alone makes a person a desirable companion. It is only half-past nine o'clock now, and I believe she has gone to bed ; it is really insufferable ! ”

With a half humorous, but wholly puzzled expression, Ruth ran out of the room, leaving the two men together. There was silence between them for a minute or two, and then Jack, looking in astonishment at the old Baronet's wrathful countenance, ventured to remark soothingly,—

“ You see, sir, after all, it is not a matter of serious importance ; in less than a year and a half I shall ask you to remember you have promised to give Ruth to me.”

“ I recollect that perfectly well,” Sir Richard responded, “ but a year and a half is a long time, and I really blame myself in this matter ; I'm afraid I have been neglectful of Ruth, she ought to have a bright cheerful young woman to associate with.”

“ But do you know of any such person ? ” Jack inquired.

The question was a perfectly innocent one, but, to the young man's surprise, the Baronet started out

of his chair with unusual alacrity, and spoke quite angrily.

“I do not know of any such person, sir; but, no doubt, there are plenty in the world.”

And Sir Richard, sitting in his library after the rest of his household had retired, continued to mutter at intervals,—

“There is really no question about the matter. It is a cruelty to employ Miss Harding, it is quite time she was pensioned off; I shall see about it at once.”

CHAPTER IV.

A MONTH had elapsed since Sir Richard's mysterious visit to Folkestone, and during that time the misgivings which had vaguely assailed Ruth on the evening of his home-coming had grown into alarming distinctness.

Her life until the arrival of Jack Rathbone upon the scene had been singularly uneventful, but not by any means unhappy. Many people pitied the handsome, intelligent-looking girl, who was doomed to pass her youth in such elderly, not to say dull society; but Ruth knew nothing of the pleasures of tennis parties, picnics, and balls, and so long as her father permitted her the indulgence of a season ticket at the Academy and other principal Art exhibitions, and an occasional concert or theatre, under the chaperonage of Miss Harding, she was perfectly content; for Sir Richard, though not demonstrative

in his affection, never found any fault with his motherless girl, and apart from the subject of his studies, which she had been brought up to believe would be far beyond her comprehension, Ruth had considered her father a very understandable and easily-pleased man.

But since his visit to Folkestone Sir Richard appeared to have changed altogether. He was still bent and old-looking, but he was no longer careless of his dress; in fact, he had become fastidiously particular, and had even threatened to discharge Brown for neglect of duty, because the man admitted, under severe cross-examination, that the hats and clothes his master was in the habit of wearing could not be considered strictly fashionable.

Then, again, his studious mornings in the library were given up suddenly, and each day, whatever the weather, at ten o'clock the Baronet left his home scrupulously arrayed, and did not return until dinner-time, stating that he had lunched at his club, but giving no other explanation of his doings.

All this had been sufficiently disturbing to Ruth,

but the fact that he each morning received a letter in a lady's handwriting, and worst of all his dismissal of her old governess a fortnight after his Folkestone trip, filled her with a sensation of genuine dismay. She had entered a warm protest on the subject of Miss Harding, but her arguments grew weaker when this lady apologetically admitted that, providing she was not inconveniencing her, she should be glad to avail herself of the Baronet's generosity, being anxious to become a partner in a school which her sister was just starting.

Ruth persevered no further in this matter, therefore, feeling that so long as she had Jack with her almost every day, she need not fear being dull, especially while her paint-box and brushes were always at hand, and innumerable subjects on which to expend her utmost powers, in the gorgeous flowers and blossoming trees, and the silvery, gleaming river.

But on this particular May morning, when Ruth was sitting gazing so wistfully up the river, and was startled by her father's unexpected appearance, she found that time for once hung very heavily upon

her hands. It happened that her supply of drawing paper had failed, so that she could not distract her thoughts with her beloved occupation. Sir Richard, too, had been in a curious condition of excitement the previous evening, and his manner on receiving his customary letter had been more markedly peculiar than ever that morning; his swarthy face had actually flushed when he saw it lying by the side of his plate on the breakfast-table, and he had begun coughing nervously—a habit of his when at all agitated.

He had thrust the letter into his pocket as usual; but it seemed he was too impatient to wait according to his general custom until he was alone before he read it, for under the pretence that he could not decipher a portion of the *Times* article which he affected to peruse, he took the newspaper to the window which was at the back of his daughter, who sat facing him.

Now opposite to Ruth it happened that there was an oak sideboard with a large looking-glass, which reflected what took place behind her, and in it she suddenly saw her father, first look over his

shoulder furtively at her, and then put his hand hastily into the pocket of his dressing-gown and draw out the letter, which he then read, with a face of great satisfaction.

Completely mystified, she awaited some explanation of his singular proceedings, but when he returned to the table he did not allude to the letter, and his daughter noticed that the nervous little grating cough became almost incessant.

The Baronet did not speak for several moments after he had seated himself by his daughter's side ; but presently, clearing his throat with an effort, he laid his hand upon Ruth's arm, and said,—

“ My dear, it grieves me to see you looking and seeming so lonely and worried.”

She started. There was nothing whatever in the words, it was her father's manner that invested them with so much importance ; moreover, he did not look at her while he spoke, and it was his habit to peer into her face closely through his spectacles when he addressed her. Her heart began to beat with an undefined dread of what was coming.

"I am not worried, father, indeed," she faltered, not so strictly truthful as usual; "why should you imagine that I am?"

"I don't imagine it, I am certain of it, and until a few days since I blamed myself severely for having sent Miss Harding off so suddenly. I did think latterly that she was really worse than nobody, but I admit I was mistaken. I judged you, my dear, by a manly standard. I would infinitely rather be alone than with an uncongenial or unintelligent companion; but, of course, I have my books, and with a girl it may well be different. Understand, my dear Ruth, I am not complaining of you in any way; it would be strange indeed for me to have to find fault with you; your weariness and *ennui* are perfectly natural."

The Baronet's words died away, and he coughed uneasily, but his daughter did not attempt to break the silence which ensued, so oppressed was she with the evident fact that Sir Richard was only beating about the bush, because he felt the extreme difficulty of the subject he was about to broach.

"The fact of the matter is, my dear Ruth," he

recommenced at length, "I have this morning received a letter, which has given me genuine pleasure, and which I hope will lead to very agreeable results. The letter is from a lady whom I made the acquaintance of with her cousin at Folkestone, accepting an offer from me that she should take up her residence here as companion to you."

Ruth heaved a sigh of relief; her father's news was certainly unwelcome, but when he had spoken of an offer which he had made and had had accepted, her heart positively stopped beating; but since it was only a companion for herself that he proposed, the matter was comparatively unimportant, since of course he would not force the lady upon her.

After five minutes of animated discussion, however, she perceived to her dismay that her father seemed indisposed to be overruled in this matter.

"My dear," he said, in an injured firm tone, "you surprise and hurt me very much; I thought you would have given me thanks for the trouble I have taken."

"You misunderstand me, father," she responded; interrupting the Baronet's eulogistic description of

the stranger; "it is not because I do not feel grateful that I decline the companionship you offer me, it is because I know I am happier as I am. I should feel so strange with this lady, I could never make a friend of her."

The Baronet sat up stiffly, and his ugly face grew forbiddingly stern, as he regarded his intractable daughter.

"My dear," the old man said irritably, "I have told you that this lady is of a gentle and most amiable disposition, and markedly intelligent, therefore it is almost repulsive to hear you say you could not make a friend of such a person. To some girls, I am aware, pre-eminent personal attractions would be objectionable in a companion, but I also know perfectly well that you are incapable of such petty weakness."

"Why, yes, father, of course; such an idea never entered my head for a moment. I am sorry, dear, indeed I am," she faltered, "that my objection to the companion you suggest appears so unreasonable to you, especially as you have gone so far in the matter; but, of course, the lady could scarcely expect

anything to be definitely arranged without my being consulted, could she ? ”

The Baronet was silent for a minute, and then he started off so rapidly that his daughter was almost powerless to get in a word.

“ Ruth, it is time there should be a better understanding between us. Your present way of expressing yourself is not agreeable to me, and I should be glad if you will recollect that you are my daughter, and for the next year and a half, at least, that you must defer to my wishes. After you are married, of course, your principal desire will be to please your husband. Well, take my word for it, he will not like a dictatorial tone any more than I do.”

Sir Richard’s breath failed him here, and poor Ruth, in utter mortification, could only murmur,—

“ Oh, father, you pain me dreadfully ; I did not mean to dictate to you, indeed, I only wanted you to believe that I am perfectly happy as I am ; at least,” she continued, with a swelling heart and heaving breast, “ I was happy until you told me I had annoyed you. I would not vex you for the world.

I should feel I was incurring mother's anger, as well as yours, if I worried you in any way."

Sir Richard's heart smote him; he was not so blind as to be unaware of the years of devotion that had been bestowed upon him by his young daughter, and his harsh voice was softer as he proceeded,—

"My dear Ruth, you have never given me a moment's trouble until now. I am sorry to find you are not inclined to appreciate the companion I have secured for you, but I cannot attempt to indulge your whim on this subject. I have engaged Miss Westall for three months, and it would be a manifest injustice to her to throw her over because you are disposed to be unreasonable."

Ruth's heart sank lower and lower; she could not have explained why at the moment, but she had a terrible distaste to the proposed alteration in their *ménage*, and at last she said hesitatingly,—

"Father, do I understand that you are obliged to engage Miss Westall because you have made some monetary contract with her?"

"Partly on that account, certainly; she would feel

the loss of the salary severely," Sir Richard responded grimly.

"Because, in that case," the girl continued earnestly, "I would so much rather you did not give me my allowance this June. Let that go towards Miss Westall's salary; pay her the same as if she had been here, and allow her to accept some other engagement."

With an explosion of wrath, the Baronet arose.

"I am very much offended with you, Ruth," he said harshly; "your offer of money is vulgar, and vulgarity in a daughter of mine is a positive blow to me. Miss Westall will take up her residence here on Monday: this is Thursday; she will occupy Miss Harding's rooms, and an upholsterer is coming from town this afternoon to arrange for brighter hangings, and new carpets. The old ones did very well for Miss Harding, but they are scarcely suitable for a young lady like Miss Westall; and your best way of regaining your place in my estimation is by showing a dutiful and cheerful submission to my wishes on this subject."

Saying which, the Baronet walked away with jerky,

uneven steps, leaving his daughter perfectly dumb-founded with distress and astonishment that her father should take an interest in carpets and curtains—an earthquake would have been less unexpected!”

When Jack Rathbone ran his boat into the bank and, jumping nimbly out, saw Ruth standing by the side of the rustic seat, he stopped with an involuntary expression of dismay.

“Why, my darling,” he cried, “what is the matter? You have been crying.”

“I am unhappy, Jack, oh, so unhappy!” she faltered, “but I wish I had not cried about it; I cannot bear girls who are always weeping and wailing; I feel ill-tempered too, and all sorts of other horrible things; I am quite ashamed of myself. I have thoroughly disgusted father, and I am wretched; he actually says I am vulgar.”

With a grave countenance, Jack sat down by her side.

“Tell me what it is, dear,” he said simply; “there must be some mistake that can be set right; your father must have been very stirred to speak to you like that.”

"He was," Ruth replied dolefully; "I have never seen him anything like it before. Oh, Jack! his manner is extraordinary; he has actually been ordering new carpets and curtains for Miss Harding's rooms."

Jack's countenance expressed as much astonishment as Ruth could have expected, but, by the time she had finished her long story, a humorous twinkle appeared in his blue eyes.

"Why, you goose!" he cried, turning her averted face towards him, "so this is your dreadful trouble, is it? Ruth, it will be well for you if you never have a more serious one. Ah! no, dear love," he went on tenderly, seeing that she shrank a little from him; "you mustn't misunderstand me, or think that I don't sympathize with your griefs, whether they be great or small. Heaven forbid that any heavy trouble should ever come upon you, my darling, but if it does I shall be there to share it, please God; and with you by my side, Ruth, I should have courage to fight a legion of troubles. After all, dear, however disagreeable Miss Westall may prove, you need not see much of her, for I don't suppose

she will have the bad taste to thrust herself upon us when we don't want her. Come, cheer up, Ruth, the time will pass very quickly."

"While you are here," she replied, with a sigh, "I am not afraid; but to be left with her when you are away!"

"There, there, love, don't anticipate trouble," Jack continued, soothingly. "You may like the lady after all. By Jove! engaging a companion is a very simple matter comparatively. I really thought you were going to tell me that your father was about to present you with a step-mother."

"Oh, Jack!" Ruth cried, "I was afraid of that too, but you don't think he would be capable of such a thing, do you?"

"Why not?"

"Why, Miss Westall is young, and father is quite old."

"Not so very old, after all," Jack continued; "you see you mustn't judge him by his looks; but never mind, Ruth, don't let us ring the wedding-bells before we need. I was only joking, I have a great respect for Sir Richard; he is not likely to do

anything imprudent, but if the worst comes to the worst there will be a double wedding in the family. Come, the river is lovely to-day, let me take you for a row ; there's a delightful little breeze, just sufficient to blow away all your shadows. Ah ! that's right, Ruth, I may smile, but I can tell you, dear, it gives me a pain at my heart when I see a cloud on your sweet face."

For two sunny hours the young people lingered on the river, and when Ruth stepped ashore again there was a brave light in her eyes, and peace, which, however, was scarcely contentment, in her breast.

The lovers kissed each other before leaving the seclusion of the shrubbery, and then Ruth went straight to her father's study.

" Father," she said gently, " I have come to beg your forgiveness ; I have been talking to Jack, and he has shown me that I have been unreasonable and disrespectful. I am sorry."

Sir Richard took the pleading hand which lay upon his coat-sleeve, and, to his daughter's surprise, raised it to his lips and kissed it.

“Say no more, my dear,” he murmured; “I was needlessly severe this morning; I am sorry too. Now go to Jack, he is a thoroughly fine fellow. You may well be proud of him, my dear, and he of you; your frankness and your truth become you well.”

“After all,” Ruth thought, as she moved away, “there is no truer saying than that there is a ‘silver lining to every cloud;’ my father never spoke so kindly to me before.”

And Jack, smoking his cigar under the trees on the lawn, waiting for Ruth, murmured to himself,—

“How charming the weaknesses of some women are! By Jove! what a convenient thing it is that they have weaknesses too, for if they had not where would the boasted superiority of man come in?”

CHAPTER V.

RUTH's first impression of Arabella Westall was a far more agreeable one than she had anticipated.

The lady was certainly possessed of a very shrewd order of intelligence, and during the month of her acquaintance with Sir Richard, while she affected to consider whether or no she should accept the engagement, which had been offered within a week of the Folkestone episode, she had made a point of ascertaining the daughter's characteristics as far as it was possible from her not very observant father.

Sir Richard fancied the interest Miss Westall manifested in Ruth was a sign of her sweetness of disposition, but her cousin found the subject a very tiring one, saying, on the Baronet's departure after a more than usually prolonged discussion on the girl and her peculiarities and tastes,—

“For mercy's sake, Belle, find something else to

talk about with the old boy ; I am sick of the very name of Miss Forrest."

Arabella held out her tiny hand.

"Give me a cigarette, Bertie," she said ; "I shall not have many more opportunities of enjoying the fragrant weed. Miss Forrest would be awfully shocked at me, no doubt."

"Oh, confound Miss Forrest !" Herbert Westall replied, handing the cigarette and holding a light, while Arabella, with her dainty slippered feet stretched out in front of her, puffed away in perfect content. Presently she took the cigarette from between her lips, and said coolly, fixing her lustrous eyes upon the discontented young man,—

"Look here, Bertie, I am tired of your ill-humour. It's not fair on me. Do you want this business given up ? "

"No, of course, I don't, Belle," he muttered gloomily. "It seems to me the best thing we can do, taking our comfort in this world into consideration, and leaving the next out of it."

Arabella Westall laughed softly, but the smile

faded out of her face almost immediately, and she continued gravely,—

“Very well, then you must not inflict your tempers upon me; I have a hard time before me, any way. You are a fool, too, in this matter. Do you not see how necessary it is for me to please this domineering young lady? Unless Sir Richard is to find his household a peaceful one after my arrival I might just as well stay away. The girl is naturally inclined to resent my coming; I can make that out perfectly well. Sir Richard has been obstinate in one encounter with her, but she would manage him in the end if I were not careful, and I should get my *congé* in three months. I can see the sort of girl she is, and I shall conduct myself accordingly.”

Arabella Westall leaned back in the common lodging-house arm-chair, and finished her cigarette, watching the rings of smoke as they rose with placid innocent eyes, and then rising she walked across to her tall, gloomy companion, and laid her soft little hand on his shoulder, having to stand on tiptoe to do so.

"Upon my word, Bertie," she said, with a little half comic grimace, "we women are curious mortals. I dare say Miss Forrest would consider you singularly unattractive; and so you are, in fact——"

"Oh, hang it all, Belle——"

"Yes, you are," she persisted, "you are ugly; well, ugly men seem to be in my line, don't they? You are ugly; you certainly are not good tempered, and you are not above the average as regards brains. Do you know, I fancy there can be only one reason for my being more fond of you than of anybody else in the world?"

"And that is what, you little witch?" he asked, with a heavy smile, placing his clumsy hands on the rounded graceful shoulders.

"Why, you know I have a great respect for thoroughness, wherever I meet with it—intensity is the new term—and you certainly are thoroughly wicked, Bertie, at any rate. There are no half measures about you, and there lies your attraction for me. Now, good-bye for the present. I have any amount of shopping to do. I can assure you

my ingenuity is rather taxed in this matter. I shall have to regulate my dress in this way. I must be pleasing and fashionable, but not too much so; you see, I must not attempt to vie with my—what shall I call her—mistress? Pupil? Ah, no, my friend, for the present, at least.”

Sir Richard thought that nothing could have been more charming than Miss Westall’s manner when she was introduced to his handsome daughter. For an instant the pretty little woman appeared to hesitate, as though she were somewhat embarrassed by her novel surroundings, and then advancing to Ruth she held out her hand and said frankly,—

“I trust we shall be good friends, Miss Forrest; but you must remember this—though Sir Richard Forrest has engaged me in the capacity of companion for three months, you will be by no means obliged to put up with me for so long if you should not like me. I hope you will like me, for I think I could be very happy in this beautiful old house; but I don’t want you to feel that in receiving me into your home you are admitting a person whose society may prove very burdensome to you, and yet

whom you will be compelled to endure for twelve long weeks. At any moment my stay with you can terminate, if you wish it."

There was something pleasing to Ruth in this very unconventional and straightforward address, and she grasped the small hand warmly, and looked down into the upturned ingratiating face with a friendly expression in her hazel eyes.

Jack was favourably impressed with the new-comer also, and when Ruth walked down with him to the lodge gates that evening—the moonlight glinting on her creamy satin dinner-dress, donned in honour of the new-comer and her cousin, who joined them at the meal—he congratulated her warmly.

"She seems a charming little creature," he said, heartily; "she's awfully pretty, though not quite the style I admire; Sir Richard likened you and she to Portia and Titania, and, upon my soul, the simile was very appropriate. Then again, she seems retiring and quiet; that's a blessing, for somehow or other one appears to expect companions to be aggressively eager to amuse. The cousin is not good

form, certainly ; but I fancy you will get on with her, don't you, darling ? ”

“ I hope so,” Ruth replied with a shadow of doubt in her voice. “ But now, good-night, dear ; you will come again to-morrow, Jack, will you not ? ”

“ Why, of course I shall. Good-night, my dearest.”

“ It's curious,” he muttered to himself, after waiting to see Ruth's figure disappear round the curve of the avenue of elms, “ how difficult a woman finds it to get rid of a preconceived opinion. Ruth had made up her mind that she would not like Miss Westall, and she will be some weeks before she can forget that.”

Ruth sat for a long while at her open window that night, watching the moonlight glimmering on the placid river, and then with a sigh she coiled up her hair which had been streaming over her shoulders in luxuriant masses, and disrobing went to bed, murmuring to herself as she laid her head upon her pillow,—

“ I will not think of her any more to-night ; I am convinced I am unreasonable. People say first

impressions may always be relied upon, and my first impression was pleasant. I hope I am not developing a suspicious nature; Jack likes her too. I daresay she is nice, only—oh, there I am beginning it all over again; I will not think of her any more to-night. Mother used to say I had a strong will; well, I will that I think of nobody but Jack until I go to sleep.”

Apparently Ruth’s effort was a successful one, for within ten minutes she was in a deep slumber, and from the happy smile on her face it might have been inferred that her last waking thoughts had influenced her dreams.

On rising the following morning she firmly resolved to meet her new companion with an unprejudiced mind, and to do her utmost to make the relationship between them a pleasant one; but she was obliged to admit to herself, as after breakfast she took her usual seat overlooking the river, while Miss Westall unpacked and arranged her belongings in her two bright luxurious rooms, that there was something about the new-comer’s manner which did not improve on a closer acquaintance.

"She affects sincerity," Ruth murmured to herself. "I suspected it last night, I feel sure of it to-day."

She hinted something of this impression to Jack when he arrived, but he laughed at what he styled her lawyer-like perspicacity, and much mortified she changed the subject, determining to make no further complaints unless she had very direct evidence to support her word.

As for Sir Richard, he was in the seventh heaven of delight, and even Jack pulled down the corners of his lips with a slight grimace, when presently they saw the couple advancing slowly along the shrubbery path, Miss Westall carefully accommodating her buoyant light step to that of the infirm, apparently aged man, while she looked up into his face eagerly, and listened with an aspect of the deepest respect to his somewhat maundering conversation.

"Ah, Jack," Sir Richard cried heartily, "I thought I should find you both here. Will you and Ruth pull us for a mile or so down the river? Miss Westall says she does not know this

part of the Thames, and this is just the day to see it for the first time."

The young couple murmured a not too gracious assent, but as they seated themselves, the Baronet with the rudder-lines in his hands, Arabella cried,—

"But am I to do nothing, then; am I to be the only lazy one?"

"You don't go in for rowing, I expect," Jack remarked, rather curtly, eyeing the trim little figure with small approbation in his glance, for the pleasure of rowing the Baronet and the charming little lady was a very doubtful one, when it robbed him of a *tête-à-tête* with Ruth.

"Rowing!" she exclaimed, with a silvery laugh: "oh no, I should be no good whatever at that, I have never had a scrap of muscle; Bertie used to tease me dreadfully about my weak arms when we were children. I would give anything to be able to do that," she cried, in admiration of Ruth's vigorous, though graceful handling of the oar; "I admire strength, of all things."

Here the lady came to an abrupt stop, and looking up from her oar Ruth saw that Miss Westall's

colour was deepened, and that she cast a rapid uneasy glance at the old Baronet before she continued,—

“At least, when I say I admire strength beyond everything, I am not quite sincere, for after all physical strength ranks with me far below that of the intellect; but,” she went on, being anxious to change a subject she did not feel she had managed well, “if I am too insignificant to row, I might steer; Bertie used to say I was only fit to be coxswain.”

“Would you like to?” Sir Richard asked, eagerly. “Do you know how?”

“Why, no, I don’t, but I’m teachable, and could easily learn—that is,” she continued, with charming diffidence, “if you would not feel it too much trouble to teach me.”

“I shall have the greatest pleasure,” Sir Richard responded, assisting her to change places with him, and putting the rudder lines into her delicately gloved hands; and thereupon ensued a lesson in steering which Miss Westall appeared to find very amusing and Ruth and Jack thought equally tedious.

When at length the expedition came to an end, the Baronet, after helping Miss Westall out of the boat, took her to see some rare specimens of ferns in one of the conservatories, leaving the lovers to follow behind.

“That boating was an awful sell for us, Ruth,” Jack whispered; “go and put on your riding-habit; there is an hour-and-a-half yet before lunch, and if Miss Westall requires as much information about ferns as she did about steering, your father will have all his time occupied; she doesn’t learn easily, I’m afraid she is a trifle stupid, after all.”

But Ruth’s face was very grave as she turned away.

“She is not stupid,” she murmured to herself, “I almost wish she were; she understands more of steering than my father does, I am certain. If she had not followed his directions we should never have come into collision with that launch. I’m certain she pretended ignorance to please him; well, she succeeded in that, any way.”

* * * * *

Six months passed rapidly away, and although

Ruth could not rid her mind altogether of doubts as to her companion, she was compelled to admit to herself that, after all, the engagement of Miss Westall had not proved unsatisfactory.

Ruth was not fond of housekeeping, she was not clever at this sort of thing, and moreover grudged the time which it took from her beloved painting; but matters had gone smoothly on the whole, and if his dinners were not quite as well cooked as they should have been, and the menus rather monotonous, considering the large sum he paid annually to the head of the culinary department, Sir Richard had felt that it would be singularly out of character for him to appear to notice such mundane things.

Arabella Westall, however, for reasons of her own, being eagerly on the look-out for any opportunity of making herself useful and agreeable, soon perceived that the Baronet was in the habit of turning over his food with anything but a contented countenance—a fact that was familiar to his daughter, who long ago had accepted it as illustrative of his lofty contempt for mere bodily

indulgences ; but the companion suspected otherwise, and when she had been there about a month she came to Ruth one morning immediately after breakfast, with a trim little holland apron over her pretty morning gown, and a chatelain hanging at her side, which made quite a musical jingle.

“How do you like my apron ?” she said merrily, “don’t you think it looks housewifely ?”

“Very much so,” Ruth replied, smiling ; “but it would be more suitable to me than to you. By-the-bye, perhaps if I were to get myself up more in character, I should inspire my servants with some wholesome awe of me.”

“You are not fond of household matters, are you ?” Arabella inquired, softly.

“No, really and truly I am not at all, but I am very much ashamed of it ; my mother was so clever ; I wish I was more like her in every way.”

“Your mother was older than you were when she commenced housekeeping,” Arabella said gently ; “besides, she was planning and thinking for her husband’s comfort ; that makes a difference, my

dear. I should not wonder if some day you were quite as good a manager as she was."

"Well, I hope your kindly prophecy will come true, I am sure," Ruth went on, and then with a little sigh she turned towards the door, saying,—
"Now I must go down and give my orders; oh, dear, I wish there were more animals and birds that one could feed off."

She had laid her fingers on the handle of the door when she felt her arm touched.

"Ruth!" said Miss Westall, speaking very hesitatingly, "I am going to make what you may think a very impertinent suggestion."

"Indeed!"

"Yes, I want you to let me help you in this matter; I am a trained cook myself; my aunt, Herbert's mother, who brought me up, had me taught. I have not liked to remark upon it before, but your cook is either not a good one, or she has become lazy. At your age I should not have noticed any more than you do, unless I took a particular interest in such things; but it is a fact that since I have been here we have

had the same soup and the same savoury every day."

"You don't say so!" cried Ruth in horror; "what a good thing it is that father is as unobservant as I am."

Arabella Westall let the remark pass, but there was rather a singular smile in her eyes as she looked up into her companion's face. "Let me order the dinner for you to-day," she said, softly; "let me tell cook that you have given me full authority. I'll take care not to offend her; it seems she has a niece in New Zealand, and as Australia is practically the same thing to her, she has once or twice waylaid me for a little chat. May I take the keys and go?"

"But it is troubling you so," Ruth murmured, much tempted.

"On my honour, it will be a pleasure to me," Arabella responded frankly. "I feel as it is that I do nothing for you; perhaps, however, I may be able to be of some comfort to you when Mr. Jack is gone. Now I am off, and you can finish that moonlight sketch; I saw you looking longingly at

it just now. How I wish I could paint like you do, but since I have so few accomplishments," she continued, laughingly, "you ought not to deny me an opportunity of shining in a very humble way."

Ruth's studio was rather a peculiar one. The dining-room of 'The Lodge' was a huge apartment, with French windows opening towards the east, and another somewhat high narrow window in a corner facing northwards. It happened that this was the only convenient room with a north light, and Sir Richard making no objection, the north end had been given up to Ruth, and here she had her easel and her painting cabinet, and her pedestal on which to arrange her groups of still life. A few of her landscapes were to be seen on the walls of the dining-room, but the majority of Ruth's work ornamented her bedroom, where, if he had only been permitted to enter, a connoisseur would have found much to admire and to wonder at. Ruth, however, was singularly modest, and unaware of her own excellence, but her painting was a genuine delight to her, and she was really grateful

to Arabella for giving her the opportunity of getting to it sooner.

That night at dinner Sir Richard did not remark upon the soup, or the fish, or the flesh, or the fowl, though Arabella, keeping a covert watch upon him, saw that he was consuming his food with great satisfaction, but when he came to the savoury he could contain himself no longer.

“My dear!” he cried, beaming at Ruth, “surely cook is on her mettle to-day.”

Ruth smiled brightly back at him, but she shook her head with a laughing reproach.

“Father, you have played me false,” she said, “and you ought to pay my debt of honour.”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Why, I bet Miss Westall a pair of gloves that you would not notice the dinner. I am very glad you have, though; I shall discharge the debt with pleasure.”

Thereupon Ruth explained what had taken place in the morning, and the delighted Baronet made quite a courtly little speech in acknowledgment of the lady’s kindness. From that time Arabella

Westall took the ordering of the dinner upon herself, by so doing pleasing everybody; and the Baronet selected the handsomest russia leather glove-box procurable for money, and filling it with two dozen of the best French kid gloves, gave it to his daughter that she might pay her debt of honour with interest.

At the end of the first three months Arabella had been re-engaged, and Ruth had entered no protest against it, but as the second three months drew to a close she began to perceive an air of embarrassment in the home atmosphere which caused her considerable uneasiness; the Baronet was nervous and irritable, and looked more than usually old and haggard; Arabella's face wore an anxious, slightly expectant expression, and lost some of its bloom and roundness; while Herbert Westall became a positive personification of gloom. Even Jack noticed that there was something wrong.

"What's the matter, here, darling?" he asked Ruth one evening; "everybody seems out of sorts. And as for the colonials—well, they're right down dismal. Do you know, Ruth, I have a theory on

that subject. I fancy Herbert and Arabella want to make a match of it ; every now and then I catch them looking at each other very peculiarly, and I also fancy they don't like announcing the fact to the Baronet."

"But why should they not?" Ruth cried.

"Ah, that's a question," was the somewhat enigmatical answer ; "anyway, the old gentleman seems dreadfully put out about something."

"I hope it is that," Ruth replied ; "between ourselves, Jack, I should be very glad of that marriage."

"Yes, so should I, dear," Jack responded. "I think we've had about enough of Miss Westall, and Herbert is a decided infliction."

But though Ruth tried to take comfort from Jack's suggestion, she found the matter very difficult ; for, even allowing that he was right, it was terribly mortifying to a girl of high spirit, who had always been accustomed to regard her father as a very superior being, to have to admit even to herself that his present depression was the result of jealousy stirred by a woman almost forty years his junior.

It was an understood thing in the family that on the expiration of each three months Miss Westall was to present herself in the sage's library for the purpose of receiving her quarter's salary, and Ruth noticed on the morning when her second payment became due, that Sir Richard's nervousness and depression seemed to culminate; Arabella also was singularly quiet at breakfast, and the softness of her tones became almost pathetic. She waited for a few minutes without speaking after Sir Richard had left the room, and then she said with assumed timidity,—

“Do you think I had better go to your father's room this morning? You know this is the twelfth of the month.”

“Then you should go, certainly,” Ruth replied. “Why do you hesitate?”

“I am afraid Sir Richard is not so well pleased with me,” she murmured; “he has seemed in such bad spirits lately.”

“I can scarcely imagine he is not pleased,” Ruth responded, in slight embarrassment; “he has always been subject to occasional attacks of depression.”

"I am glad to hear it," Arabella went on more brightly; "any one in my position is apt to fancy themselves responsible for all sorts of uncomfortable things, I shall go in with a braver heart now."

Ruth did not move for some time after Arabella went away, but presently she looked up at the clock and started uneasily.

"It is eleven o'clock!" she exclaimed under her breath; "she has been an hour in there. What did she mean, I wonder? She said she felt nervous and doubtful, but her eyes were almost triumphantly bright. Is it possible that Herbert Westall proposed to her last night? They were talking for a long time in the conservatory."

With a sigh Ruth walked to the door and half opened it; as she did so she stopped involuntarily, for she heard her father's voice just outside speaking in an excited whisper.

"You would rather tell her yourself," he said; "you are quite sure of it?"

"I would," Arabella Westall replied, quietly; "now good-bye, dear sir, for the present. As for

Ruth; you know she loves you dearly ; she would do nothing to make you unhappy, I am sure."

With a pale face Ruth retreated from the door, her fears being greater because she was aware from the peculiar, but now familiar, intonation of Arabella's voice, that her words had been intended to reach other ears than those to whom they were addressed.

Ruth was gazing into the fire when Arabella approached her, and putting her little hand under the girl's arm linked herself to it.

"Ruth," she said, "I have something to tell you; your father has asked me to be his wife, and I have consented."

With an exclamation Ruth disengaged herself.

"You cannot mean it!" she cried; "it is not possible that you can love a man of my father's age."

The little lady looked very grave.

"You should not speak so, my dear," she said; "it would make your father very unhappy were he to hear you, and he has a right to please himself in this matter. I will not pretend that I feel for

him as you do towards Mr. Jack ; every woman is not blessed with such an ideal love as yours ; but I honour and respect your father from my heart, and I love him too, and will do my best to make him happy, and you also if you will allow me."

"But your cousin—surely your cousin loves you!" Ruth cried, imprudently.

Arabella's face grew graver still.

"I cannot tell what has given rise to such an impression as that," she replied, gently ; "your dear father had also fallen into the mistake. Herbert and I have been fond of each other from little children, and if we had wanted to marry we could have done so years ago. Now, Ruth, I will leave you to yourself, I will not complain that you have not spoken one kind word at a time when I should appreciate it doubly, for I am afraid in your position that I should act as you are doing ; but there is one thing I will beg you to remember. Your father loves me, and although, of course, he would not endure dictation from you on this matter, you could, to a great extent, spoil his present happiness."

Arabella did not wait for Ruth's reply, but as she

wended her way to her own comfortable sitting-room she murmured to herself,—

“I flatter myself I managed that very well. She’s a sensible girl, and when she comes to think she will see it’s no good kicking against the pricks; the hint of her wanting to dictate to her father, too, was useful; she positively shrinks at that word.”

“Now to write to Bertie,” she continued, seating herself before a handsome cabinet; “he was in a fine fury last night. Ah, dear, what impulsive idiots men are! He would have had me rush the whole affair. I’ve managed to get the offer in six months, I don’t think he need complain.”

When Ruth came down into the drawing-room at dinner-time, Sir Richard stood there alone. As his daughter entered, he looked up quickly, and there was a wistful, half apologetic expression in his dim eyes which touched her.

“Well, my dear,” he faltered,—“well, Ruth?”

Her pale face flushed, and the tears came into her eyes, but she controlled her emotion, and going to him, kissed his cheek softly.

"I hope you will be very, very happy, father," she said simply.

The Baronet grasped her hands warmly, and regarded her with proud affection.

"I am happy, Ruth," he said; "I doubt whether there is a happier man in the world; and I am proud of you, my dear. I shall not forget your generous conduct to-night as long as I live."

CHAPTER VI.

RUTH would probably have suffered more as the time for her father's incongruous marriage approached had her mind not been filled to overflowing with the thought of her parting with Jack, which was to take place a month after the wedding. In fact the marriage had been somewhat hastened in order that the girl might have the consolation of Jack's society during the four weeks of her father's wedding trip; but not all Jack's powers of comforting could bring to her pale face even the faintest smile, as she waited in the church, while her father stood by the altar rails looking eagerly for the entrance of his young bride, who was to be given to him by her cousin Herbert.

The wedding ceremony was witnessed by very few; Arabella had left 'The Lodge,' and removed to a respectable lodging in the neighbourhood a

fortnight before, and Sir Richard had not felt it necessary to invite any of his friends.

Several of his male acquaintances, however, having heard what was on the tapis, came to see what they fancied might prove rather an amusing spectacle ; but there was scarcely one of them that did not regret their curiosity afterwards when they saw the blush of shame which mantled in Ruth's face when she recognized them.

"By George!" whispered one to another, "that poor girl is suffering, anyhow ; well, it's an uncomfortable look-out for her ; the bride can't be more than two- or three-and-twenty, and he must be, bless me, how old ? He was more than old enough to be his first wife's father."

"He's not more than sixty-two at the utmost, though he looks nearer eighty," was the muttered reply ; "that comes of shutting yourself up with a lot of musty old books ; but Dick Forrest never was young. I remember him at college."

"Oh, here comes the bride ! Good Heavens ! did you ever see such a pair ? She reminds me of a

fairy queen in a pantomime! She can't be more than five feet high, I should say!"

But when the carriage containing the newly-wedded couple drove up to the bride's lodgings, the obsequious landlady uttered a little cry of dismay, and ran down the steps towards it; for instead of the sweetly smiling, rosy countenance she had expected to see, the face of the bride was pitiable to behold. Her large violet eyes were staring before her in a ghastly fashion, her cheeks were deathly white, and her mouth drawn and pinched, as though with acute bodily pain.

"She is over-wrought," Sir Richard whispered to the startled woman, "she has a very sensitive nature. Come, my dear," he went on, addressing his wife tenderly, "let me help you out, you will be better in a few minutes."

But, to the Baronet's utter confusion, his bride motioned him to stand away, and, laying a trembling hand on the landlady's arm, she alighted and ran quickly past her husband, and up the steps into the house.

"Do not follow me," she panted, "let me be by

myself." Then she whispered to the landlady, her white lips quivering with agitation, "I am going to my room, send my cousin Herbert Westall to me directly he arrives. Do you hear? my cousin, nobody else; I will see nobody else."

The woman raised her eyebrows in astonishment, but she gave the required promise, and after Lady Forrest had locked herself into her apartment, she returned to the mortified bridegroom, shaking her head very ominously as she descended the narrow steep stairs.

"No good ever comes of such marriages," she muttered. "I don't know which of the two is the most to be pitied, which of the three I might say, for I'm certain sure that there cousin is fond of the little lady."

The disconsolate Baronet was standing alone in the small dining-room wherein was set out a modest, but refined, little cold collation. Arabella had gained the landlady's heartiest approval by preparing this meal entirely herself.

"I cannot afford to go to a good pastry-cook," she had said, simply; "and Sir Richard is not strong,

he is particular about his eating, and this is the only hospitality I shall ever offer him."

"He will be hard to please if he ain't pleased with this," the woman said, as the pretty lodger flitted about in a white dressing-gown, putting the last touches to the table preparatory to assuming her simple silver-grey satin wedding-dress. "Why, you've made the table look a regular picture, miss; it's a pity as your husband's so well off, you'd have been a splendid wife for a gentleman with a limited income."

"How is she now?" the Baronet inquired, anxiously, as the woman entered the room.

"Well, sir, she's what I call a bit hysterical," she replied, soothingly; "but, Lor' bless you, you mustn't worrit yourself, she will be all right soon; I was just the same, you might have knocked me down with a feather when I come back from the church with my poor old man."

The Baronet winced perceptibly, and the woman continued eagerly, making things worse as she proceeded,—

"Least-ways I called him my old man because I

was fond of him, not that he was old at that time, we was well matched; what I mean is—well, sir, your lady she'll be all right soon, you see if she ain't. She wants to speak with her cousin just for a minute, he's known her from a child, she tells me; at such times one seems to want one's own people, you see, and here he comes, and your beautiful daughter, and her gentleman too; wonderful like you she is, sir, only she's tall and you ain't.

“Oh, my word!” the poor woman gasped, as she went towards the street door again, “I never got into such a muddle before in all my born days, that I never did! Well, people shouldn't make such marriages, then there would be no chance of their feelings being hurt. As my poor old man used to say, ‘Them as has bad corns ought to sit with their feet under their chairs; if they sticks 'em out in front of them they mustn't blame yer for treading on 'em.’”

As Ruth and Jack hurried to the Baronet, the landlady laid her hand on Herbert's coat-sleeve and said mysteriously,—

“She ain't well!”

“Who isn’t?” he inquired sharply.

The woman eyed him with no very favourable glance.

“My Lady Forrest is ill,” she replied curtly, “and she wants to see you.”

“To see me! Isn’t she with her husband, then?”

“No, she’s locked herself in her room, upstairs. She won’t see nobody but you. It’s not very nice for the poor old gentleman, any way.”

Pushing past her roughly, Herbert Westall ran upstairs, his face lined with anxiety and his heart beating loudly; but although he had been prepared by the landlady, he could not restrain a stifled exclamation when, in answer to his summons, the key was turned in the lock, and the bride stood before him, clinging to the handle of the door for support.

Her face was quite livid in hue, and there was an absolutely despairing expression in the distended eyes.

“Great Heavens! Belle!” he cried, catching her in his arms, for he saw that she was tottering on

her feet. What is the matter? You are not going to break down now, surely?"

His anxiety made his tones harsher than usual, and the unhappy woman, releasing herself from his grasp, stumbled to a chair by the side of a table, and, sinking into it, covered her miserable face with her hands.

"What is it?" Herbert repeated, shaking her by the shoulder. "He doesn't suspect anything, does he? Speak out, can't you? Don't you know, if he does suspect, that we must make a run for it?"

Lady Forrest felt the hand that had been laid so roughly on her shoulder begin to tremble.

"You need not fear," she moaned, "he suspects nothing."

Herbert Westall's face cleared in an instant, and he heaved a groan of relief as he passed his bony hand across his damp forehead.

"You frightened me, I'll confess," he faltered, then, kneeling down by her side, he whispered, bending over her, "What is it, little woman, you have been so plucky all through, what has upset you now?"

"It is something he told me as we were driving home from church," she gasped.

"Something he told you?" Herbert repeated.

"Yes, something awful—something that nearly killed me! Bertie, we have been deceived in him; he is sixty-two years of age, not over eighty, as we thought; he may live for twenty years! Oh, what have I done? Think of it—twenty years! We fancied we might have to wait a year, but even that seemed almost interminable to look forward to. Bertie, I cannot bear it, I shall go mad!"

With a catch in his breath, Herbert Westall clutched her arm with his strong fingers, but he did not speak for a minute or two. Presently, however, he bent his head down again, and his lips were pale and twitching, as he murmured into her ear,—

"Keep calm, Belle; be brave, he will not live long to trouble us; he *shall* not live long, only be brave."

She shuddered, and, raising her head, looked him in the eyes fixedly.

"He did deceive us," she said, slowly and dis-

tinctly. "He did not actually tell a lie, but he knew we believed him to be much older; he confessed as much to me just now."

"Yes," the man replied callously; "he has deceived us, and he must take the consequences. Had he been as old as we imagined, with one foot in the grave, in fact, we could have waited; as it is—well, we will talk further on that subject when you are back. Now, my dear, we ought to go down. Good-bye, Belle, give me one kiss, and don't forget to write to me every day while you are away."

"I shall not forget," she moaned, clinging to him. "Oh, Bertie, my courage fails me!"

"But that won't do, Belle," he went on anxiously, striving to instil a little strength into the despairing woman, "you must go through with it now; trust me, it shall not last long. Now come down with me, my dear girl, it's not safe to remain away from him."

"But I look awful, don't I?" she cried, shrinking back.

"You look a little pale," he answered soothingly, holding her cold hand tightly in his; "but nobody

will find fault with that. Come, rouse yourself, Belle, for my sake, if not for your own."

Herbert Westall certainly used the strongest argument that was possible when he urged his own claim upon his fainting cousin. Passing her handkerchief over her clammy brow, she went to the toilette glass and rearranged her disordered hair.

"I am ready," she said, turning to him, with glittering determined eyes; "you need not be afraid, Bertie."

The cousins did not speak as they descended the stairs together after their lengthy interview, but Lady Forrest's first words on entering the room showed Herbert Westall that he need have no further fear for her powers of self-control.

"I am very, very sorry," she said, quietly going to her husband and taking his hand, "I do not often make myself so foolish; I was over-excited, I suppose; I hope you will excuse me."

Ruth and Jack waited to see the bride and bridegroom depart, and then the young man said cheerfully,—

"Well, it's over now, and it really wasn't quite so bad as the anticipation, eh, Ruth?"

There was no answering smile on Ruth's face, and to Jack's dismay he felt her shiver suddenly.

"You are not cold, darling, are you?" he asked tenderly.

"No, I am not cold, Jack; but I can't help thinking of Herbert Westall's face, it quite haunts me."

"My dear!"

"Yes," she continued anxiously, "didn't you notice a difference in it?"

"When?"

"Why, when they came down together, after she had been ill; his face was like a fiend's! Jack, I am frightened for my father!"

CHAPTER VII.

It appeared to Ruth that the four weeks of Sir Richard's wedding trip positively flew, and each night as she retired to rest she sighed to think that Jack's dreaded departure was growing nearer, as well as the home-coming of her father and his new wife. She struggled against this latter feeling, and blamed herself severely, for the letters from Sir Richard were full of praise of Arabella, while those of Lady Forrest were thoroughly unaffected and genial.

But though she blamed herself, no argument could banish from Ruth's mind suspicion of her step-mother, nor could she forget Herbert's ominous face on the morning of the wedding. She was careful, however, not to harass Jack with her doubts; she wished his last weeks in England to remain with him as a happy memory until they

should meet again, and Jack was thoroughly and completely happy in the present, at least. He was so much in love himself, too, that he was inclined to make great allowances for the elderly Baronet. He knew that, in consequence of his marriage, Ruth's fortune would be much curtailed; but, being well off, he looked upon this as rather an advantage than otherwise, it having vexed him that even in the matter of money she should be giving more than she would receive.

It happened that Sir Richard was married on the Wednesday before Easter Sunday, and on the Thursday, having dismissed their pupils, the two Misses Harding arrived to officiate as chaperones, and to spend their three weeks' Easter vacation at 'The Lodge.'

On the return of the bride and bridegroom, everybody agreed in such hearty praise of Lady Forrest, that Ruth felt quite ashamed she could not echo the general enthusiasm, and her face flushed when her old governess said on parting,—

"Good-bye, dear child, I hope you will be happy; but to be happy you must cultivate a contented

spirit. You must not think me unkind, my love, but your father had every right to please himself, and really Lady Forrest is a very, very charming creature."

Ruth made no reply, but kissed her friend, and then walked away, and, seating herself at her easel, murmured,—

"How does she manage it, I wonder? She seems to put me in the wrong with every one but Jack."

A week later Ruth lay upon her bed, making no effort to restrain the sobs which seemed to burst from her very heart. Jack had left her for six long months, and now all the comfort that life held for her would be the arrival of his letters. But two months must elapse before even this poor consolation could be hers, for Jack was to ship to Melbourne early the following morning, and the thought of two long months without a word from him appeared to poor Ruth overwhelmingly terrible.

Presently, however, she grew almost ashamed of the vehemence of her grief, and began to take herself to task for her weak indulgence of her sorrow.

"I am glad at least I did not break down before he went," she faltered, wiping her eyes, and pushing back the masses of her hair; "there were tears in his eyes when he turned from me. Oh, Jack, Jack, my love, I will try to be brave, and look forward as you told me. After all, one must bear something for love's sweet sake, and, as he said, six months is not a lifetime; but his lips trembled as he spoke, my darling, and six months will seem longer to me than to him."

Here, despite herself, the tears began to flow again, and she was still sobbing bitterly when at length the door of her room was gently opened, and a tall, angular young woman of about five-and-twenty entered, and advanced to the side of the bed.

This person was Jane Hunter, a lady's maid, who had been engaged by Lady Forrest before she left England for her wedding tour, but who had not commenced her duties until her mistress returned home.

Jane Hunter's face was intelligent, but the complexion was sallow, and the features were plain and strongly marked. In fact, as Lady Forrest laughingly admitted, the new lady's maid was thoroughly

unprepossessing in appearance; but she looked clever, and, moreover, to the colonial she had a further recommendation which Sir Richard readily recognized when his affianced bride suggested that she should like to engage her.

“She is as I was six months ago,” she murmured; “she is friendless in a strange country, and, curiously enough, she is a native of Sydney as I am.”

Therefore Jane Hunter had been engaged with the understanding that she was also to make herself useful to Ruth, who had hitherto declined the services of a regular lady’s maid.

The woman stood for a moment gazing at Ruth, whose face was covered with her hands, and whose figure trembled with the violence of her sobs, and then she said in a low soft voice,—

“Miss Ruth, I knocked twice, but you did not hear me.”

The girl started, and made a supreme effort to control her tears.

“Is that you, Jane?” she said, still covering her eyes with her hands; “I have a headache, but I have no doubt it will be better soon.”

"I hope so, miss, I am sure," Jane replied ; " my lady has sent you up this cup of tea, and Sir Richard wants to know if you will be well enough to come down to dinner. He seems anxious about you, miss ; but my lady didn't come up herself because she thought you wouldn't want to talk."

Ruth's heart was very soft at that moment, and she was touched at her step-mother's kindness.

" She is very good, Jane," she murmured ; " thank her from me, and tell my father I will certainly come down to dinner ; he is not to worry about me, I am not ill."

" It's more of a heart-ache that you have now, I expect, than a headache," the woman rejoined ; adding quickly—" Excuse me, miss, I am afraid I am taking liberties, but there is not a servant in the place but what is sorry that Mr. Rathbone is gone ; and although I've been here so short a time, I can fancy how hard it must have been to say good-bye to him. Don't take offence at my plain speaking, miss, please ; I should be sorry that you thought me presuming."

" I do not think anything of the kind," Ruth

murmured. "I am sure I am not disposed to be ungrateful for the sympathy of any one. Everybody knows that Mr. Rathbone and I are engaged, and I need not be ashamed of grieving for him. Now, Jane, I am better already ; let me drink the tea, and give my message to Lady Forrest."

"And afterwards I will come up and brush your hair for half an hour, miss," Jane responded ; "you have no idea how much it will ease your head. I won't talk, I will be perfectly quiet."

Surprised and pleased at the maid's sympathetic tone, Ruth rose and bathed her swollen eyelids, and after Jane had brushed her soft dark tresses for a time, she really began to feel comforted and soothed, and, dismissing her attendant with a smile of thanks, proceeded to dress for dinner with a lighter heart.

On reaching the drawing-room she stopped in some surprise ; Lady Forrest was seated in a low chair by the side of the open window, through which Ruth could see her father and Herbert Westall pacing slowly up and down on the velvety lawn ; and in front of Lady Forrest, listening intently to her earnest words, which, however, were

inaudible to Ruth, was a stranger, who at a glance she perceived to be a young man with a thin stooping figure and curiously light hair.

Lady Forrest was so much interested in her conversation with the stranger, that she did not hear the girl cross the room, and was not aware of her presence until she had approached within a few feet of her chair; then, with an exclamation, she suddenly broke off in the middle of a sentence, and rose hurriedly, while her companion retreated a few steps and revealed to Ruth's astonished eyes a countenance suffused with blushes and covered with dire confusion.

The new-comer's face was boyish and weak-looking, and his light watery eyes were somewhat restless and ill at ease, but it was a kindly and gentle countenance, and Ruth was sorry for his embarrassment; which, however, supposing him to be somewhat bashful, was far less incomprehensible to her than the startled expression which had been plainly discernible in Lady Forrest's eyes on beholding her.

But the lady recovered her composure far sooner than the gentleman.

"You positively frightened us, Ruth," she said, with a silvery laugh; "in the waning light you looked quite ghost-like in that white dress. Let me introduce you to my cousin's friend, Mr. Felix Dent; Bertie fancied we should be feeling rather dull this evening, so he prevailed upon Mr. Dent to take pity on us."

A loud knock at the door interrupted her, and Ruth had scarcely shaken hands with Felix Dent when the footman entered with a telegram.

"Is it for me?" she cried impulsively, thinking of her absent lover.

"It is addressed Forrest; nothing else, miss," the man replied.

"Then bring it to me, James," his mistress said, continuing with a laugh. "Now, Ruth, don't look dismal, my dear; you know it is my privilege to open all ambiguous letters. You would scarcely believe what a childish delight I have in opening letters, Mr. Dent; it is quite a weakness with me."

"I thought it might be from——" Ruth hesitated.

"Ah, yes, from Jack. Well, if it is, I won't keep it from you, you may be sure."

Ruth walked away, for she knew that the stranger's eyes were fixed upon her, and she also felt unreasonably out of temper, and was well aware that her cheeks were flaming with vexation and eagerness.

Presently, however, her curiosity and anxiety compelled her to turn round again. Her step-mother was still attentively studying the telegram, which apparently contained an unusually lengthy message; but, as Ruth faced her again, she crumpled the pink paper hastily in her hand, and thrust it into her pocket.

"It is from my dressmaker," she said calmly.

"A dressmaker sending a telegram of that length!" Ruth cried, doubtfully.

"Oh, they are awfully extravagant creatures, these fashionable milliners; not but what she will take care to charge me for the message when she sends in the bill; the item 'sundries' is very elastic," Arabella replied, with a laugh.

"But why did she not write?" Ruth questioned, still uneasy.

"Oh, my dear," Lady Forrest responded, laughing again, "what a pity it is that ladies are not

admitted to the bar here, you would have made a most energetic cross-examiner. Now, I did not intend a pun, Ruth, though you do look just a trifle cross, really."

The Baronet and Herbert entered as Arabella laughed, and Ruth pouted.

"What's the joke, my dear? Take us into it," Sir Richard said, looking with tender admiration at his pretty, merry little wife, and with less approval at his stern, pale-faced daughter.

"Oh, it's nothing worth repeating, Richard," the lady responded. "I have received a telegram from my dressmaker, which Ruth thinks will put you to unnecessary expense, that's all."

The Baronet raised his eyebrows and drew the corners of his lips down grimly, which caused his wife to laugh more merrily than ever.

"Why, you are solemn now, Richard," she cried, "I shall tell Madame Manton she must not send me any more telegrams; I can't stand being in every one's black books on account of her extravagance."

Sir Richard went to his wife, and taking her hand in his, raised it to his lips.

"My dear," he said, "you know you may cost me a fortune in telegrams if it pleases you, I am vexed that my daughter should have considered it becoming to notice such a trifle."

Ruth's cheeks flushed again, and a sparkle came into her eyes, but she did not speak, feeling that if she did so, her indignation would probably get the better of her prudence, but her step-mother took up the cudgels for her, by so doing charming her infatuated husband, and making his daughter appear still more ungracious.

"I will not hear you blame Ruth, Richard," she said, gently; "it is one thing to laugh at her, and another to reprove her; she does not deserve it. Madame Manton is a ridiculous person, she could have written perfectly well, I am not in such a desperate hurry for the gown; moreover," she whispered, drawing him a little apart, and stretching her pretty white throat to bring her lips nearer to his ear,—"moreover, you must not forget, my dear, that for many years Ruth has had the control of your money in small matters, it would be almost impossible that she should not sometimes make a slip of this kind;

but any way," she continued, looking lovingly into the old man's face, "you must not be severe with her to-night; remember poor Ruth has had a great trial this morning; being so happy ourselves, we should make every allowance for her."

The Baronet pressed the soft hand tenderly.

"Belle," he murmured, "you are an angel! It grieves me that my daughter appreciates you so little, I always thought Ruth was above all petty jealousies."

"And so she is, Richard," the lady replied quickly; "she is natural, that's all, and she's just the least little bit in the world disposed to be managing. However, don't you make the mistake of interfering between us; I love her, and if you don't try to set matters right she will come to love me, I am certain of it."

It is doubtful whether in any circumstances Sir Richard would have questioned his daughter, and given her the opportunity of righting herself, but had any such intention been in his mind, his lady's last words quite banished it, and Ruth's heart ached when she saw the cold gravity with which her

father regarded her during the remainder of the evening, which, notwithstanding the presence of Mr. Dent, was unmitigatedly dull.

On the whole, however, she was glad that the young man was there, for it was some relief to have a companion who was at least inoffensive; and the society of Felix Dent had this advantage, also, to one who was completely self-absorbed; his conversation, which he carried on in a very soft, gentle tone, was by no means engrossing, and the girl found it quite possible to follow the bent of her own thoughts while he talked, returning him from time to time a monosyllabic reply, which fortunately appeared to satisfy him entirely.

But before Ruth retired to rest a circumstance occurred which revived the latent uneasiness that the sight of the telegram had caused her.

Feeling she might escape to her own room after Mr. Dent had taken his departure, she turned to say good-night to her step-mother, and found that neither she nor her cousin Herbert were to be seen. The French windows into the garden stood

open, and, walking to them, Ruth discovered the two strolling together on the terrace.

Lady Forrest and her companion had their backs towards Ruth when she first looked out ; they were apparently talking very earnestly, for the lady's head was raised, and he was stooping his towards her with his shoulders bent in a most ungainly fashion. But presently Ruth saw that they stopped, and that Arabella put her hand into her pocket and drew something from it, which Herbert Westall took hurriedly from her. As he lifted his hands on high that the moonlight might strike across what he held, Ruth saw in his fingers the crumpled piece of pink paper which Lady Forrest had declared contained the telegraphic message from Madame Manton.

Having read the paper slowly through, Herbert returned it to his cousin, and as he did so a sudden gust of wind carried his words to the mystified girl.

"That's lucky," Westall said harshly ; "but don't keep the thing ; burn it at once now I've seen it."

They turned towards the house at once, and when they re-entered the drawing-room Ruth certainly displayed far more embarrassment than did either of the others, Lady Forrest kissing her step-daughter affectionately, and Herbert Westall expressing clumsy sympathy for the headache from which she evidently still suffered.

“What does it mean?” the girl muttered to herself, as she slowly ascended the stairs, sighing heavily. “There is some mystery here. I was sure at the time she was not telling the truth when she said that telegram was from Madame Manton, and now I am confirmed in that impression. I am afraid there is something in her past that she would not like my father to know. Ah, my poor father, I fear his present happiness will not be of long duration. God bless him! I cannot bear that he should look at me as he did to-night.”

Ruth's fears were for her father, but could she have heard the conversation at that moment taking place between the cousins, and have read the words on the scrap of pink paper which Lady Forrest was twisting up preparatory to consuming in the flame

of a candle, her pity and alarm would not have been for Sir Richard.

"We must throw them together as much as possible. You understand, Belle?" Westall said, watching the flame as it flickered. "The old boy was very eloquent on the subject of flirtation the other day; he evidently regards it as a positive crime; it's the one thing he couldn't forgive in any woman, he says; well, that's lucky for us, for it will be strange if you and I between us can't manage the matter."

"It won't be so easy," Arabella replied thoughtfully. "Dent is so painfully uninteresting, and as for the girl, she is too wrapped up in her painting to care to go about with a man like that; why, even Jack Rathbone used to grumble mildly sometimes at her devotion to art, and now he is gone of course she will be doubly enthusiastic."

"Well, we shall have to knock that on the head, somehow; it will be necessary for her to ride and boat with him, you know," Herbert went on, gnawing his moustache. "You can find out some way, of course."

The telegraphic message was from "John Rath-

bone, Langham Hotel, London, to Ruth Forrest, The Lodge, Polesworth. My plans are suddenly altered. Found a cable awaiting me from Montreal. Sail for New York in *Aurora* from Liverpool at nine to-night. Only an hour to prepare, no time to write. Address me 'Royal Hotel, 5th Avenue, Montreal.' Will write explaining everything directly I land. Business very urgent, could not delay going. Shall go to Melbourne afterwards. Cable at once if you should be in difficulty of any kind. One word would be sufficient. Come. God bless you!"

When Jane came into her young lady's room that night she found her just folding up a sheet of foreign paper.

"Can you post this for me to-morrow morning, early, Jane?" she asked.

"Of course I can, Miss Ruth. Any letters you want to send you can trust to me."

"I wish Mr. Rathbone to receive a letter from me directly he gets to Melbourne, and I see that the mail goes out to-morrow; it will arrive before his ship, so the letter will be awaiting him at the Hotel. I have put 'To be left till called for.'

"Very well, miss, I will post it before they clear the boxes at seven. Good-night, Miss Ruth. Is there anything more I can do for you?"

"No, nothing, thank you, Jane," Ruth replied gratefully. "Good-night!"

Writing a few loving words to Jack had comforted Ruth strangely, and she was soon sleeping peacefully, but her slumbers would have been more disturbed had she seen Jane stopped and interrogated by her step-mother.

Lady Forrest took the letter from the woman's fingers, but after a minute's hesitation she gave it back to her, and proceeded to her own room, muttering to herself,—

"It's best that she should send this; she mustn't appear to have altered too suddenly, and Jack won't receive it for some time yet, at any rate."

CHAPTER VIII.

AT the end of a fortnight after Jack had taken his departure, Ruth sat one morning in her bedroom, surrounded by a confusion of artistic properties, panting with heat, and with an angry light burning brightly in her clear, honest eyes.

"It is too bad," she muttered, "too bad! I have tried so hard to be patient, but I shall hate her soon; and what can be her reason for this, I wonder?"

Here the girl ceased, and walking to the darkened window, pulled up the blind, letting it down again immediately, as the scorching rays of the July sun blazed into her dazzled eyes.

"What shall I do?" she murmured hopelessly, "as I told them it is impossible for me to paint here. How shall I occupy myself for the next five months?"

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Oh! Jack, Jack, come back, do come back! I am miserable without you?"

Ruth was an early riser, and every morning during the summer months she managed to get at least an hour at her favourite pastime before the half-past eight o'clock breakfast, and when Sir Richard appeared, it had been her habit to show him her morning's work, and invite him to criticize it. Sir Richard had very little true love for art, and absolutely no real sympathy with an artistic temperament, but his taste was cultivated, and he was proud of his daughter's marked and original talent, and these few minutes of confidential artistic chat with her father were very precious to the ardent young painter.

During the term of her salaried engagement at 'The Lodge,' Arabella Westall had made no attempt to obtrude herself between father and daughter, but when her criticism had been politely invited, she had given it with a laughing apology for its ignorance of the canons of Art. Since her return from her wedding trip, however, she had altered her tactics, and Ruth found that each morn-

ing the few minutes that Sir Richard devoted to her grew shorter and shorter, Lady Forrest invariably distracting his attention with some *mal à propos*, but apparently perfectly innocent, remark.

On this particular morning, however, Arabella had not approached the north window of the dining-room, but had remained at the farthest extremity of the apartment, while Sir Richard, seated in front of the easel in appropriate critical attitude, with his head on one side, and his hand hollowed so as to focus the picture, sat blinking through his spectacles at Ruth's latest effort.

"It is capital, my dear," he said at length; "this is an improvement on anything you have done yet, Ruth; the effect of the sunset through the trees, and the little glimpse of water is really good, and the whole thing is atmospheric and clear and brilliant. You must let me have that in my study, my dear, it is pleasant to look at."

Ruth positively glowed with pleasure, and bending down kissed her father impulsively; he had not spoken to her so warmly since his marriage; but her pleasure was greatly damped when, raising her eyes,

she saw that her step-mother was regarding them from the other end of the room with a cold, attentive air.

Striving against the unpleasant impression which this gaze always produced in her, Ruth tried to smile, as she said pleasantly,—

“Will you not come and give me your opinion also, Arabella?”—it had been arranged, to Ruth’s relief, that she was to continue to address her step-mother by her Christian name,—“my father is making me quite conceited, and I long for more praise ; one’s appetite for that sort of delicious food grows apace, evidently.”

“In a minute, dear,” Lady Forrest replied sweetly, and then, to her surprise, Ruth saw the lady take from her pocket a little silver bottle of scent, with which she sprinkled her handkerchief, holding it to her face as she advanced. The old Baronet looked up as she approached,—

“Why, my dear,” he exclaimed, “is there anything wrong? You have not a toothache, I hope?”

“Oh no,” she replied, “why should you imagine that?”

"Because you have your hand up to your face."

"Oh, that's nothing," she responded quickly, still holding the dainty cambric handkerchief to her mouth and nose. "Now let me look at this picture. Oh, it's very good indeed—capital, I should say. Come, Richard, breakfast is quite ready."

But though Lady Forrest seemed in such a hurry to get to breakfast, she appeared unable to eat anything, but sat sipping her tea, and, with a plaintive expression in her violet eyes, applying her scented handkerchief again and again to her delicate nostrils.

"My dear," the Baronet cried, when she somewhat ostentatiously sent away a dish which the footman had just handed to her, "do you know that you are declining mushrooms and kidneys, cooked according to your own recipe? I thought it was your favourite breakfast dish, and these are delicious."

"I daresay they are, Richard," she answered softly, "but I cannot eat this morning."

"Why, Belle," he continued anxiously, "you couldn't eat yesterday at lunch, or yesterday morn-

ing, or the morning before that, what is the reason of it ? ”

“ Oh, nothing particular,” she answered. “ Don’t worry yourself, I am quite well; I am only, to quote Bertie, a little ‘ off my feed.’ ”

“ But I cannot have it go on,” persisted the Baronet, fussily. “ How do you account for it ? ”

“ I don’t attempt to account for it ; suppose we put it down to the hot weather. Now, Richard, please satisfy yourself with that explanation.”

Lady Forrest affected to desire to stop Sir Richard’s questions, but Ruth had no difficulty in perceiving that her real intention was to keep him to the subject.

“ I am not satisfied,” he went on, “ and unless you give me some better reason than the hot weather, I shall send for the doctor.”

“ Oh, my dear, pray don’t,” the lady cried in musical tones of dismay ; “ he would laugh at us both.”

“ I shall risk that,” the Baronet responded haughtily. “ I shall write to him immediately after breakfast. I won’t have you starving yourself.”

There was an embarrassed silence, and Lady Forrest cast her eyes down, while Ruth sat puzzling her brain as to the meaning of the little comedy that was being enacted before her, and in which her father was a most unconscious performer. Presently the lady looked up again, and said sweetly,—

“Oblige me by not sending for the doctor, Richard, I do not require him indeed.”

“I am the best judge of that,” he responded shortly.

Lady Forrest shrugged her shoulders slightly, and then in a very deprecatory, hesitating tone, she continued,—

“I am sorry you won’t do as I ask you, dear, but since you will not, I must stop you sending for the doctor. I don’t want to make either you or myself ridiculous, and I shall be perfectly well when I get acclimatized to it.”

“Acclimatized to what?” Sir Richard exclaimed, in some irritation.

“Well, the fact of the matter is, Richard, the smell of the oil-paint rather upsets me, but I shall get used to it, no doubt.”

Ruth's cheeks flushed crimson ; she understood everything now, but she did not speak, she waited for her father.

"The smell of the oil-paint, my dear!" the Baronet exclaimed ; "but that has always been the same, has it not?"

"Yes," she replied, "and I ought to have got accustomed to it long ago ; perhaps, however, it is the hot weather that makes it more trying. Don't look angry with me, Ruth, I should not have mentioned it even now, if your father had not threatened me with the doctor."

"And you have been feeling this all along and have never complained?" Sir Richard cried, tenderly.

"Why no, of course not," his wife responded ; "why should I complain? I must get over the unreasonable aversion as quickly as I can, that's all."

"But, my dear, I cannot allow you to be tried in this way any longer!" the old Baronet said, firmly.

"Ruth, you must find another room to paint in."

"I cannot do that, father," the girl answered,

biting her tremulous lips in her efforts to steady her voice; "this is the only available room where the sun does not shine in."

"Well, I can't help that, Ruth; I won't have my wife's health injured. You must move your things, please, before lunch."

Ruth's cheek grew pale, but she spoke very gently.

"Father, I don't fancy you understand me. I cannot paint anywhere but here; the sun is dazzling in my room, and when the blinds are down it is too dark. Let me leave off for a few days; Arabella's appetite has only just failed, it may not be the paint, after all."

"It may not be, certainly," the other lady broke in, "but I am rather afraid it is; I have felt it coming on for some time. However, the state of things is not likely to continue long. You none of you feel it, why should I?"

Ruth remained silent, not knowing what to say, feeling convinced in her own mind that her step-mother's indisposition had no real existence; but she was roused to really active anger when her father

rose, and fixing his eyes upon her, said in tones which shook with suppressed feeling,—

“Ruth, I am shocked at you, really shocked! Am I to understand by your silence that you are at all undecided as to the course you must pursue in this matter, and that to gratify yourself you are prepared to injure one who to me, at least, is very dear? I am ashamed of you, such selfishness is intolerable!”

“Father, you are unjust!” Ruth cried, passionately, her breast heaving and her eyes sparkling. “I am not selfish, I do not believe in this sudden, unreasonable aversion; and you are cruel to want to deprive me of my only pleasure; without my painting I should be entirely miserable.”

The Baronet raised a trembling hand to silence her; he was really horrified at his daughter’s excitement, and the doubt that she had dared to express of his beloved wife filled him with a tumult of rage.

“Leave the room, Ruth,” he gasped, “and do not let me see you again until you are prepared to beg my pardon, and my wife’s pardon too, for the

insult you have offered us. I do not know what you mean by being miserable ; if you are so it must be in consequence of your own unhappy temper. Go away, please, it grieves me to speak harshly to you ; go away, and argue yourself into a better state of mind."

Her pulses throbbing with emotion, Ruth ran upstairs, and for half an hour or more the tempest of mortified anger continued to rage within her ; but, being of a very generous nature, she was inclined to be far quicker to forgive than to resent, and before noon arrived she had come to blame herself seriously for her want of control over her feelings.

"I have been very foolish," she sighed, bathing her aching brow, "and very wrong too ; I must try to harden myself, or I shall be continually falling into her traps, and making my father angry. Of course that was all nonsense about her objection to the paint ; she wanted, as usual, to put me in the wrong. No doubt, now she has attained her object, she will make it a special favour to herself that father allows his ungracious daughter to continue her art

undisturbed, and in a day or two her appetite will be all right again. Well, I suppose I must go down and say I am sorry with as good a grace as I can. It is quite out of the question to remain at enmity with my father. He looked white with anger, as well he might, considering I threw a doubt upon his divinity. I am very very sorry I did it, I should never forgive myself if I dispelled his dream of bliss."

Thoroughly contrite, Ruth went towards the door, fully determined to swallow her pride, and, for the sake of her father, even to humble herself before her step-mother, but before she reached the threshold her steps were arrested by a bumping sound in the passage outside, and then a knock.

Opening the door, she discovered the footman carrying her large easel, while behind him was another man-servant with her painting cabinet.

"Sir Richard has ordered us to bring these things up here, miss," the man said; "are they to go into your room?"

With a gesture of assent, unable to speak, Ruth retreated into her sleeping chamber again, and

walking to the window that the men might not see her face, remained there quite quietly until they had made several journeys up and down stairs, and the floor was littered with everything that she had been in the habit of using in the exercise of her adored accomplishment. When they had gone she sat herself upon her easel seat, and stared dry-eyed round her.

Presently the luncheon gong sounded, but she did not stir, she could not have eaten, and she positively dared not go down until she had to some extent calmed the intensity of her anger against her step-mother; towards her father she could not continue to harbour ill-feeling, knowing, as she did perfectly well, that his injustice to her was the result of his blind infatuation.

The gong sounded for the second time, and in a couple of minutes afterwards Ruth heard Jane's knock at her door.

"I cannot come down, Jane," she said, "I am not feeling well; ask my father to excuse me."

The maid looked keenly into the troubled face,

but she withdrew without a word. In a few minutes, however, she returned, carrying on a tray a plate of soup and a glass of sherry. Ruth's heart gave a little throb as she perceived her.

"Did my father bid you bring me that?" she asked, in a softer tone.

The woman hesitated a minute, and then she replied gently,—

"Well, no, miss, he did not, he did not say anything when I gave him your message, but I thought it was wrong that you should not take something, and I hope you will oblige me by drinking that soup and wine; I cannot bear to see you looking so pale."

Ruth's lips began to tremble, her heart was terribly sore, and the woman's unexpressed, respectful sympathy was very soothing.

"Is there anything I can do for you, miss?" Jane continued, ignoring the emotion which the girl strove to control; "cannot I help you to arrange your things—are you going to paint here for the future?"

"No," Ruth answered with an unsteady voice,

"I cannot paint here because the sun shines into the room."

Jane looked up quickly.

"Then where are the things to go?" she inquired, rather curtly.

"Nowhere," Ruth faltered; "the dining-room is the only room that can be used as a studio. I must give up painting for a time."

"Give up painting!" Jane exclaimed; "why, Miss Ruth, what do you mean? and you so clever at it too, and so fond of it! Why, the old gardener was telling me yesterday how you used to sketch the river, and the trees, and the flowers, when you were quite a little child, and that the first Lady Forrest used to teach you how to mix your colours and lay them on, and was so proud of you. Oh, miss, you mustn't get low-spirited and give up your painting, the time will seem much longer without that."

Poor Ruth, struggle as she might, she could not prevent the tears from welling over her burning eyes; the woman's words awoke such tender memories of the past; of the time when her own dear

mother had been by her side to cherish her and smooth away all her childish troubles, and of the day when, fluttering with pride and nervousness, hand-in-hand with that dear mother, she had approached her father, and presented to him her first finished study of a flower. Ruth could still hear the exclamation of pleasure and surprise with which the sage had condescended to honour his little daughter's artistic effort, and the recollection caused her even a sharper pang of heartache, under which her customary reserve broke down.

"I cannot paint, Jane," she sobbed; "it is not that I do not wish to do so, it is the greatest comfort to me now."

"Then why can't you do so, miss?" Jane inquired, wonderingly.

"Because Lady Forrest cannot bear the smell of the oil-paint," Ruth blurted out, "and there is no other room."

Jane compressed her thin lips.

"How does the smell of the paint affect my lady?" she asked quietly.

"She has not been able to eat well for the last

two or three days," Ruth replied, beginning to regret that she had been led into discussing her father's wife with her servant.

Jane considered for a moment, and then she said drily,—

"Of course, Miss Ruth, it's not for me to notice things, but still I can't bear what seems to me underhand ways, whoever does them. I hope you won't mention what I am going to tell you, miss, because somehow I don't fancy my lady likes me very much as it is, and I should be sorry if she sent me away, for you've been very good to me, and I should like to stay."

Ruth looked at her in surprise.

"I should be very sorry for you to go, Jane," she said kindly, "and I think you must be mistaken; Lady Forrest speaks well of you to me."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, miss, but she doesn't like me for all that; I can see it in her eyes. Of course I don't know anything about the reason of it, but it's not wonderful that my lady hasn't been able to eat her meals well for the last few days; I don't think your paints have had anything to do

with it. The fact is she has spoiled her appetite by eating at odd times lately ; cook said she had quite a hearty little lunch yesterday when she went down into the kitchen to give her orders, and I know she sent me for three more slices of bread-and-butter when I took her tea to her this morning before she was up. Of course, miss, the master does not notice these things, but it's not wonderful that she shouldn't be inclined for half-past eight o'clock breakfast, when she has had four slices of bread-and-butter, not very thin either, at half-past seven."

Ruth did not reply to this very unexpected disclosure, and the woman accepting her silence as a hint for her to withdraw, left her to herself, saying respectfully that she would return to learn her wishes in half an hour.

Ruth sat considering deeply for many minutes after Jane had gone, but at length she arose and began softly pacing the room.

" I must be careful," she thought to herself. " I don't understand her object for wishing to alienate me from my father, but it is evident she desires to

do so. Ah me ! this is only July, and Jack won't be back until the end of December. No Jack, no painting, and my father offended with me ; it is not a cheerful prospect, but I must make the best of it, I suppose. It is no use grizzling about it. I must try and bring my father round ; and as for the other two deprivations, being inevitable, I must put up with them as well as I can."

Walking to the dressing-table, she regarded herself with a rather sad smile.

"I don't see any difference in you, at present," she continued, addressing her reflection, "but if things go on at this rate you'll have wrinkles and crow's feet before Jack comes back. It isn't amiability that makes you determine to take things philosophically, it is a far less worthy feeling. I'm afraid your step-mother has wounded your pride, Miss Ruth ; she has shown that she considers you a fool who will dance to any tune she chooses ; well, she is mistaken there ; she will find that her little pricks and stings are treated with the contempt they deserve."

When at length Jane returned, she found Ruth busily engaged in arranging her artistic properties

in a corner of the large dressing-room which opened out of her bedroom.

"I have nearly done, Jane," she said more cheerfully; "if you will just help me in with this easel, I shall have finished."

"You are going to make up your mind to it, then, miss?"

"Why, yes, one can't have everything one's own way in this world, you know."

"I am very sorry, miss," the woman said quietly, "but I respect you from my heart. I am glad to see you look better. My lady wished to know whether you would come down this afternoon to tea."

Ruth hesitated.

"Mr. Dent is there, miss," Jane added.

"Oh, very well, say I will come," was the reply.

Outside, Jane met her mistress.

"She is coming down," she said abruptly.

"Oh, did you tell her Mr. Dent was there?"

"Yes, of course I did."

Proceeding to the library, Lady Forrest went up

to her husband, who was sitting with a thoroughly depressed expression on his plain old face.

"Ruth is coming round, Richard," she said, putting her hand tenderly on his shoulder; "to my delight, she says she will be down to tea. Fortunately Felix Dent has come in."

"How do you mean fortunately?" the Baronet inquired with a brighter face.

"Why, the young fellow is rather a favourite of Ruth's, I fancy. Perhaps, if he hadn't been here, she would have been longer in forgiving me."

The Baronet shook his head.

"I think you are a little mistaken, Belle," he said; "my daughter is a very sensible and good-hearted girl, I am glad to hear she has recognized her error; you will oblige me, my dear, by making no reference to this morning's unhappy difference. Ruth was in the wrong; ah, no, Belle, you need not shake your head at me and make any further excuses for her; but, for all that, it vexed me very much to have to scold her."

Sir Richard rose to his feet, but his lady made no attempt to move towards the tea-room, and her face

was so serious that he placed his hand under the pretty rounded chin, and raised it so that he could look at the innocent countenance more easily.

“What is the matter?” he asked lovingly; “you say you are delighted at Ruth’s return of good humour, but you look uncommonly grave.”

She smiled a little sadly.

“I can’t help feeling rather guilty,” she murmured. “Poor Ruth, she will miss her painting so much; if I had realized how devoted she was to it, I would have suffered anything sooner than have deprived her of it. If there was only something else that she could take up, it would prevent her feeling it so much, but she is not at all an enthusiast about tennis. Some girls go in for botany rather hotly, that would be a convenient hobby with this lovely garden, but I have never heard Ruth show any inclination for that study. I do wish something could be thought of, really I do. Richard, it’s hateful to me to feel that I am making anybody unhappy, more especially your daughter.”

Sir Richard kissed her tenderly, murmuring that

things would come all right in time, and that they would think what could be done for Ruth.

“You mustn’t tell her, though, that it was my suggestion if anything suitable occurs to you,” his wife said earnestly. “She is naturally rather hurt with me, and, judging her by myself, she would not be likely to take into favourable consideration any suggestion of mine, considering that it is through me she has lost what she prefers to everything else.”

Sir Richard nodded with lofty magnanimous superiority to such small feminine weaknesses, and two minutes later, when the Baronet shuffled into the drawing-room with his little wife hanging tenderly on his arm, they found Ruth and her companion bending together over a very fine specimen of maiden-hair fern which stood upon a table near the window; no sooner, however, did Felix Dent perceive the couple, than he started violently, and blushing to the very roots of his flaxen hair, left the girl so abruptly that she looked at him with unconcealed surprise, while Arabella cried merrily,—

“Why, Mr. Dent, what conspiracy were you

hatching with Ruth that you should appear so confused? See, Richard," she went on, laughing at the young fellow's embarrassment, "doesn't he look thoroughly guilty and found out?"

"Mr. Dent was giving me a little lecture on botany," Ruth replied quietly. "I suppose he does not like to continue his discourse in public, that's all."

"Ah, that I can quite understand," the Baronet interrupted, glancing smilingly at his wife. "Many a man has a fund of knowledge which he locks up in his own breast because he is too modest to assert himself. I should be glad, Ruth, if Mr. Dent could interest you in botany, it is a charming study, and you might well occupy some of your spare time with it."

Ruth's affectionate heart warmed towards her old father at once, she was quite sufficiently quick of perception to have understood his meaning even without that tell-tale little tremble in his voice, which, however, certainly rendered his intention all the more unmistakable; he was suggesting botany to her as some consolation for the loss of painting, and

although she did not at all recognize an equivalent in the proposed amusement, still she welcomed most gratefully his kindly thought for her.

For the rest of the evening, therefore, Ruth lent a willing ear to Mr. Dent's somewhat tedious and commonplace remarks; wandering in the conservatories with him, and congratulating herself upon being able at the same time to please her father, and to escape from the more uncongenial society of her step-mother and Herbert Westall, with whom it now appeared an established rule to come every evening to dinner, and most days in the week to luncheon.

But Sir Richard's renewed ease of mind was disturbed once more before he too closed his eyes in sleep.

His wife looked into the study, where he always remained until a late hour, before pursuing her way to her room, and coming to his side knelt down so as to bring her fair young cheek on a level with his sallow, wrinkled face.

"Well, little woman," he said, peering lovingly at her, "what is it, now?"

"It's nothing, Richard, really," she replied ;
"your eyes are too sharp."

"That's a truly feminine answer," he went on with a laugh ; "you first tell me it's nothing, and then that I am quick in perceiving nothing. Come, what is it ?"

"I thought I had my features under better control," she murmured ; "however, it's just as well I should speak out. Richard, doesn't it occur to you that these botany lessons may be rather a mistake?"

"Why, my dear, what in the world do you mean ? You suggested botany, yourself. I never knew anything happen more conveniently."

"I know I did propose botany," Lady Forrest continued uneasily, "but I did not suggest Felix Dent as a teacher ; that's altogether another matter, and I am afraid you have given him an excellent excuse for coming here very frequently ; don't you see, botany must be studied principally in the day-time."

"Of course I know that, but that is an advantage ; it is in the day time specially Ruth wants an occu-

pation, and the young fellow is not in any employment, is he ? ”

“ No, he is like Bertie, unfortunately, on the lookout for something suitable,” replied Lady Forrest, with a sigh.

“ Well, then, my dear, it will be an innocent amusement for him too,” continued the unconscious Baronet, cheerfully.

“ And it doesn’t seem at all imprudent to you, then ? ” his wife persisted.

“ Imprudent, my dear Belle, good gracious me, no ! why should it ? ”

Lady Forrest considered a moment, and then she rose and softly kissed her husband, murmuring,—

“ I am foolish, my dear, you are much wiser than I am. I am very foolish, I daresay, but it is my love that makes me so anxious for you and yours.”

Saying which she left Sir Richard, and he sat for an hour puzzling over her enigmatical manner and words,

CHAPTER IX.

THE botany lessons brought Felix Dent to 'The Lodge' three or four times a week, and although Ruth could not get to feel any particular interest in the study, she did not express her indifference to it, since, being deprived of her painting, and of all household occupations, and having a positive dislike to needlework, she would have had nothing but reading to fall back upon, had it not been for the amusement her father had suggested to her.

Towards young Dent himself her sentiments were of the mildest possible description, but the intense respect with which he treated her was very pleasing in comparison with Herbert Westall's clumsy compliments.

It is not strange, therefore, that she should have taken refuge in the society of the inoffensive Felix, whose soft voice had a soothing quality, and whose

friendship was plainly of so platonic a character. His conversation was not interesting, it is true, but with him the girl could sit and think quietly, without being afraid of being considered rude, and many a silent hour they passed in the garden, while they were supposed to be engaged in study, she with her hands folded on her lap, and her hazel eyes with the far-away expression that showed her thoughts were with her absent lover, and he lying on the grass at her feet, with his colourless eyes closed, more than half asleep.

From five to seven, as a rule, Lady Forrest, Herbert Westall, and the two young people went out riding together, and on these occasions Ruth and Felix Dent invariably led the way, while Lady Forrest and her cousin followed, the two latter laughing and talking merrily, and altogether presenting a marked contrast to the silent equestrians in front of them.

In this way a fortnight passed smoothly away, and Ruth was counting the days that must elapse before she could hear from Jack, when she perceived an alteration in her step-mother's manner.

Since the episode of the oil-paints, Lady Forrest had been far more agreeable to Ruth, and the girl was beginning to congratulate herself upon the more peaceful prospect before her, when this change of manner attracted her attention.

Arabella suddenly began to treat Felix Dent with very scant courtesy, and the young man was so plainly embarrassed and confused by her want of politeness, that Ruth experienced quite a warm feeling of indignation on his account, which was the more marked because she was perfectly convinced that Lady Forrest desired to annoy her by this want of consideration for Sir Richard's guest.

Several times the little lady prevented Dent's accompanying them on their rides, giving some lame reason for declining his society which was apparently not the real one, and when he did accompany them she so pointedly strove to interfere between him and Ruth that the girl was filled with natural anger.

At length an afternoon arrived when matters reached a culminating point. Ruth had come down to the hall in her riding-habit, and there she had found Lady Forrest, Herbert Westall, and Felix

assembled, the latter equipped for riding, and very red in the face. Through the door she could see the groom with three horses only.

Glancing quickly at her step-mother, Ruth noticed that the violet eyes were dancing with mischievous enjoyment, and that the little woman had hard work to prevent herself from breaking into an open laugh.

"Come, Ruth," she said, "we are waiting for you; say good-bye to Mr. Dent, and let Bertie help you to mount."

Ruth's face was very grave, but she spoke quietly.

"Mr. Dent is coming with us, surely; it was arranged so this morning."

"Then it was arranged without consulting me," Arabella replied, in a slightly aggrieved tone. "I think, my dear, you should allow me the privilege of giving invitations in my own house. On some other occasion I shall be most delighted if Mr. Dent will honour me by accepting a mount, but this afternoon I cannot offer it to him."

For a moment Ruth stood speechless with annoyance, and then she turned towards the stairs again.

“Where are you going, Ruth?” Lady Forrest inquired sharply.

“To my room,” was the curt reply.

“But we are in a hurry, dear.”

“Do not wait,” the girl responded, “I shall not ride this afternoon.”

Before Ruth had removed her habit Jane entered her room.

“Were you afraid that there was a storm coming on, miss?” she asked, assisting Ruth.

“No,” Ruth answered in some surprise; “there are no signs of a storm, are there?”

“I don’t think so, miss, only my lady told Sir Richard you were nervous.”

Ruth did not reply, and Jane folded up her habit and put it neatly away without making any further remark; but that evening, at dinner, for the second time the girl’s prudence gave way. Her father, her step-mother, and she were dining alone, for once, neither of their accustomed guests being present, and by-and-by Sir Richard said,—

“Why, Ruth, what was the matter with you this afternoon? It is not like you to be afraid of a clap

of thunder; besides, I didn't see any indications of a storm."

"Neither did I, father," the girl responded boldly.

"Then, my dear, what made you say you did?"

"I did not say so," his daughter went on, boiling with wrath.

Sir Richard regarded Ruth with astonishment, but before he could proceed, his wife interrupted gently,—

"Don't worry Ruth, Richard, one cannot always explain one's actions exactly. She did not want to go, and she has a right to please herself in the matter."

Ruth bit her lip in a transport of vexation, her step-mother had outwitted her in this instance, for it was in reality a difficult matter to explain satisfactorily why she had not gone, since her father might well think Lady Forrest quite justified in standing upon her dignity a little, and naturally he would not be inclined to admit for a single moment that his faultless little wife had had any unkind motive for what she had done.

Therefore Ruth remained silent for the rest of the dinner, and directly it was over made her excuses and retired to her room for the night.

Left to themselves in the drawing-room that evening, the Baronet and his wife sat silent for some little time, and then Sir Richard said,—

“Is Ruth ill, do you think, Belle?”

“I hope not,” was the grave reply.

“Why did she not ride with you to-day, then? and why has she gone to bed so early?”

Lady Forrest hesitated before she replied, with an effort,—

“Well, you see, dear, we are by ourselves this evening, and if she didn’t feel disposed to stay, I suppose she thought there was no occasion to do so.”

Sir Richard straightened his back haughtily.

“Do you mean to insinuate, Belle,” he said, stiffly, “that Ruth would have remained if we had had visitors this evening?”

“Oh, my dear,” the little lady cried, piteously, “I cannot say what she would have done, I’m sure. Let us talk about something else.”

"You will excuse me, Arabella," the Baronet continued, grimly, "but this subject interests me. I want to know why Ruth did not go with you this afternoon, and also why she denied her words about the storm?"

Lady Forrest hesitated again, and then, with a sigh, she crossed to her husband's side, and kneeling down by him, leant her elbows on the arm of his chair, and looked up pleadingly into his face.

"Forgive me," she said frankly, "Ruth was telling the truth, she said nothing about a storm, I invented that, I'll own."

"But what for?" Sir Richard asked.

"Well, Richard," she answered, leaning her fair fluffy hair against his coat-sleeve, "I didn't think you would be quite so inquisitorial, and, I confess, I gave the first reason that came into my head."

"But why not the real one? there was a real one, of course," he persisted.

"Well, yes, there was, but I don't want to enter into that," she replied, stroking his wrinkled hand tenderly.

"But I wish you to do so," her husband said

firmly. "Come, Belle, is it such a very serious business?"

"Oh, no, not at all; at least I hope not," she answered quickly. "I did not wish Felix Dent to accompany us this afternoon, nor that he should remain to dinner to-night, and Ruth was very hurt about it."

The Baronet drew his hand away from his wife's, and the lines in his forehead deepened, and Arabella continued, timidly,—

"I am sorry, Richard, to vex you, but I cannot help it. I think Felix Dent comes here too often, and that Ruth and he are too much alone together; for Jack Rathbone's sake it should not be allowed."

Lady Forrest was perfectly aware she was treading on dangerous ground, but she was not prepared for the burst of rage with which her remarks were received by her usually doting husband. Sir Richard Forrest was a very proud man, and having absolute faith in his daughter's truth and fidelity, it seemed that his wife had offered him a positive insult when she had suspected Ruth—his noble, high-spirited Ruth—of anything so utterly mean as carrying on a

flirtation with one man while another held her plighted troth.

Quite silently Arabella stood listening to the torrent of reproachful words, but when the old man sank into his chair exhausted with emotion, she went to him and placed her cool hand on his heated forehead.

"I am more grieved than I can say, Richard, to have hurt you," she faltered, "but it seems to me our bounden duty to shield Ruth from any act of imprudence."

"My daughter does not require shielding," the Baronet broke out again, but his voice was weaker, and his wife saw that he was no longer able to assert himself so strongly.

"Possibly not," she said gently, "but she is very young, remember, and any way you cannot answer for Felix Dent."

"He is Herbert's friend, is he not?" the poor Baronet gasped. "Herbert would not have introduced him into my house if he had not approved him, I presume, and any way he does not seem to me to be dangerously fascinating."

"No, indeed," Arabella answered softly, "but I imagine Ruth finds him more charming than we do. Whether she does, or does not, however, it is quite certain that he thinks her very attractive ; it was only yesterday evening I wormed out of Bertie that he introduced Felix Dent here on the young fellow's earnest entreaty. It seems he saw Ruth one night at the theatre in our box, and was desperately smitten."

Sir Richard looked rather startled at this communication, but in an instant he continued,—

"Well, I see nothing to be alarmed at in that. He has, no doubt, discovered by this time that Ruth is entirely ineligible so far as he is concerned."

Lady Forrest lowered her eyes, and her cheek flushed a little.

"I wish," she murmured plaintively, "that you would not force such an ungracious task upon me, but I must disabuse your mind of a mistaken impression about Felix Dent ; I fear he is not so harmless as you imagine ; in fact, Bertie acknowledged yesterday that his reputation was by no means

good, and young girls are so often imposed upon by men with a specious soft manner."

Once more the Baronet's anger flashed out.

"Great Heavens, Belle, you appear to forget that my daughter is *engaged* to Jack Rathbone!"

"And you appear to forget, Richard," his wife replied, looking steadily into his glittering eyes, "that Ruth engaged herself to Jack before she saw Felix Dent, and that many girls have made engagements which they have repented of bitterly afterwards."

"I do not believe that such a thing would be possible in Ruth's case," the Baronet declared hotly; "for a girl to be flirting with one man while she is betrothed to another, is positively low, I consider; my daughter comes of an honourable race, whose women have been truthful, and honest in word and deed for many generations."

Arabella's brilliant eyes sparkled mischievously, as they always did when her old husband made any reference to his honourable descent, but her tone was perfectly respectful as she continued,—

"You are very likely right, my dear, but you must remember this; Ruth's position is rather a sad

one; there are some things a girl can say only to her mother. My dear husband, do you really and truly believe that your daughter would confide in you if she found herself in any love difficulty?"

With a perfectly scandalized countenance Sir Richard pulled himself to his feet, and although he trembled with mortified pride and anger, there was something almost dignified in the bent figure as he motioned his wife out of his way.

"You displease me very much, Arabella," he said haughtily; "for the first time you have disappointed me altogether. You show bad taste and an utter want of consideration for my feelings. Such a thing as you suggest would be utterly unworthy of my daughter, or of any right-minded girl. I will leave you now, I wish to hear no more on the subject."

Lady Forrest made no attempt to justify herself, but before her old husband reached the door of the room he was brought to a standstill. A sound of subdued sobbing struck upon his ear, and turning he discovered that his wife had thrown herself upon the sofa and buried her face among the cushions.

“Come, come, Belle,” he said, returning to her, “don’t cry, my dear.”

But the little lady was not to be won over at once; shaking his hand off, she continued to weep bitterly, panting out between her sobs,—

“You—love Ruth—far better—than you—do me. I don’t believe you would trust me as you do her.”

The clouds that had lowered in the Baronet’s ugly old face cleared away by magic; there was something altogether charming to the infatuated man in this little display of feminine weakness.

“Why, my soul, I have absolute faith in you!” he cried; “come, dry your tears, I can’t bear to see them. Not trust you! I could not love any one that I felt was capable of deceiving me. Ruth knows that perfectly well. If she deceived me and did anything to bring discredit on her mother’s name, I would cast her off altogether.”

Lady Forrest’s grief, it seemed, was very easily consoled, for there were no traces of tears remaining in her bright eyes, as, nestling against her husband’s

shoulder, she hooked her arm in his and murmured,—

“When you say that, you really don’t mean anything so dreadful as really casting her off; I suppose you would not give her so much money; but she would not want money if she married Jack Rathbone.”

The Baronet kissed the pink cheek lovingly.

“You are illogical, my darling, women always are; it is one of their most charming characteristics. Don’t you see, if Ruth marries Jack she runs no risk of losing my money. You were suggesting that my girl might want to be off with the old love and on with the new in the person of Mr. Felix Dent. In that case fifty thousand pounds would be of consequence, I imagine.”

“Fifty thousand pounds!” Lady Forrest exclaimed, with a musical little cry. “Richard, will Ruth really have as much as that?”

“Yes, if she acts up to my belief in her; not one farthing if she does not,” the old man responded firmly; then he went on, smiling at his wife, “poor Ruth, it’s a little hard on her, she would have had

more than double as much if I had not happened to meet a certain little lady one evening at Folkestone."

Lady Forrest kissed the hand that held hers with a grateful murmur.

"Then, dear," she continued, in low tones, "at least you will admit that I am disinterested in advising you to help me in keeping a little watch upon Ruth and Felix?"

"I cannot understand you, Belle," the Baronet replied, irritably, "your perceptions are not nearly as acute as usual this evening; cannot you see that I wish the subject dropped? I decline to insult my daughter by watching her, and I beg you will not mention this subject again."

With a tremulous sigh Lady Forrest also rose.

"I will leave you, my dear," she said, humbly; "I am unfortunate this evening, but you must forgive me, Richard, it is my affection and respect that makes me unnecessarily anxious."

But though Sir Richard was so staunch a supporter of his daughter, and it was a fact that in his mind there existed no particle of suspicion against

her, he could not rid himself of a certain uneasiness which his wife's ominous manner had aroused ; and as he sat in his library after she had left him, he found his attention wandering altogether from the book in front of him. Despite himself, he was thinking of Ruth and Felix.

“ I wonder what that young fellow *was* talking about last night ? ” the Baronet muttered at length. “ I daresay he was repeating poetry or something, but I must say Ruth had a very sweet expression on her face while he was speaking.”

Sir Richard was only slightly disturbed after all, but could he have overheard the conversation between his daughter and her presumed admirer, his mind would have been quite at ease. Felix Dent was explaining to his companion, with tedious minuteness, the advantages of a particular build of outrigger, while Ruth, utterly oblivious of his words, was contentedly answering Yes and No at random, wondering whether in Australia the sun was shining on her absent lover at that moment, and wishing that it were otherwise, as in the moonlight he would be more likely to be thinking of her, as she of him.

CHAPTER X.

RUTH wrote a letter to Jack that evening, in which she described their new acquaintance more minutely than she had done before ; she was glad she had this subject to enlarge upon, she did not wish to mention her disagreements with her step-mother, being unwilling to vex Jack ; therefore she descanted upon the botany lessons and Felix Dent generally.

The endeavour to make her letter a cheerful one raised and calmed Ruth's spirits, and she was just acknowledging to herself that representing things in their best light, even in opposition to one's judgment, was a very good nerve tonic, when Jane's knock came at her door, and immediately the woman entered.

The lady's maid asked to be allowed to brush Ruth's hair as usual, and the girl remained for some

time thinking quietly, and not unhappily, under her patient ministrations ; presently, however, she happened to glance into the glass before which she sat, and then she uttered an exclamation of surprise, and turning in her seat looked her maid full in the face.

“ Why, Jane,” she cried, “ what is the matter ? ”

“ Nothing, miss ; at least, nothing in particular,” the woman stammered.

“ You are not telling me the truth, Jane,” Ruth persisted ; “ you look dreadfully worried and pale, what is the matter ? ”

To Ruth’s astonishment the maid walked away and began busying herself with the arrangements of the bed curtains, saying in a subdued voice,—

“ My lady is very angry with me, Miss Ruth, I am afraid I shall get my dismissal to-morrow, and I am in great trouble about it. I cannot bear the thought of going away.”

Ruth was much touched, for she understood perfectly well what her attendant meant, and she also believed it was because the woman was openly attached to her that her step-mother had taken so unreasonable an objection to her.

“Why is Lady Forrest angry with you, Jane?” she asked kindly. “Tell me, perhaps I may be able to do something for you.”

“I am afraid not, miss,” Jane responded. “Your good word would do nobody any service with my lady. I beg your pardon, miss, I didn’t mean to be rude, but that’s what’s said in the servants’ hall, though I oughtn’t to have repeated such gossip. Lady Forrest is angry because she fancies she found me listening to her and Sir Richard while they were talking in the drawing-room just now.”

“But you didn’t do so, of course?” Ruth said earnestly.

“No, miss, I did not, but the door was open and I could not help hearing; my lady came out and found me there, and she was furious; I can quite understand why.”

“I cannot,” Ruth said, much puzzled.

The woman looked up quickly into her face, and was on the point of speaking when she appeared to alter her mind, and with an ominous shake of the head, proceeded to tidy and arrange Ruth’s things. Ruth was by no means curious by nature, but there

was something in her companion's manner which perplexed her.

"You are very mysterious, Jane," she said.

Jane stopped in her occupation, and fixing her penetrating dark eyes on the girl's anxious face, considered deeply.

"I don't know what to do for the best, miss," she said at length. "I think I ought to let you know, and yet you have quite enough to worry you already."

The lady's maid glanced at the letter lying on Ruth's writing table, and the girl, imagining she referred to the separation between herself and Jack, answered with a smile,—

"That trouble will not last for long, Jane."

Again the woman shook her head gravely, as she continued,—

"I wasn't thinking of Mr. Rathbone, miss; that is not an unnatural trouble for you to bear, you'll love each other all the better afterwards for being parted now. I was thinking of other worries of yours much nearer home than Mr. Jack Rathbone."

Ruth winced.

“ Perhaps we had better not talk of other things, Jane,” she murmured.

But Jane was not to be stopped now that she had made up her mind to speak.

“ I know, miss, it’s not my place to speak a word about your father to you,” she said, earnestly ; “ but though I respect him very sincerely, I do think he was to blame this evening for saying what he did.”

Ruth rose from her chair and approached the woman, whose eyes drooped uneasily as they encountered hers.

“ Jane,” she said firmly, “ since you have said so much, you must explain further. What do you mean ? ”

Jane hesitated strangely, but presently, with an effort, she raised her dark eyes, and looked straight into the girl’s face.

“ Miss Ruth,” she muttered, moistening her dry, cracked lips, “ I heard Sir Richard talking to my lady about the disposition of his money.”

Ruth heaved a sigh of relief ; she had arrived at no conclusion in her own mind as to what the woman could possibly have to say, but her mysterious

manner had alarmed her and filled her with vague misgivings.

"Why," she cried impulsively, "is that all? Then it is nothing very serious. I am sorry you overheard a private conversation, of course, especially as Lady Forrest is annoyed about it, but, so far as I am concerned, I am not at all anxious about that matter."

Once more Jane shook her head ominously.

"That's all very well, Miss Ruth, but Sir Richard shouldn't have let out that you'd have half his fortune, and that you stood between my lady and fifty thousand pounds; it's a lot of money, and if you weren't here, I suppose she would have it all."

With an uneasy chill, Ruth turned away from her companion.

"I don't think you understand the case exactly, Jane," she murmured. "Let us say good-night now, and please oblige me by not repeating what you've told me to any one else."

"You can trust me, Miss Ruth," the woman replied. "I am not a gossip, and I wish I felt everybody was as much in your interests as I am. Still

I think master was very imprudent in speaking so plainly ; after all, he doesn't know much of my lady and her cousin."

"There, that will do, Jane," Ruth interrupted. "Please dismiss the subject altogether from your mind ; I shall."

"And shall I post the letter, miss ?"

"Yes, do ; now good-night."

Leaving the girl, Jane hurried along the passage, glancing nervously over her shoulder as though she feared she might be followed. Arrived at Lady Forrest's room, she turned the handle of the door and went in abruptly without knocking. Her want of ceremony might well have roused that lady's wrath, but she only looked up eagerly as the maid entered, and desiring her to lock the door, motioned to her to seat herself in a chair close to the wicker lounge on which she was reclining in picturesque *deshabille*.

"Well," she asked sharply, "have you told her ?"

Jane nodded grimly.

"And how did she take it ?"

"Perfectly indifferently," the woman replied.

"Ah, well, she has the night to think of it in. You put it pretty plainly, I suppose?"

"Yes, I couldn't have said more, but she's a noble-hearted girl, and she isn't quick to suspect."

"Don't you be so sure of that," Lady Forrest said with a sneering laugh, "she's deep. Oh, so you've got another letter, eh?"

"Yes, am I to burn it?"

Lady Forrest considered a moment, and then stretched out her soft little hand.

"Let me have a look at it, it may be useful," she muttered; "give me my scissors and the gum."

Jane Hunter passed her what she required, and then stood with grimly compressed lips while Lady Forrest opened the envelope deftly down the side with the sharp-pointed scissors, in such a way that it could be closed up again with the assistance of some gum so as to defy any but the very closest and most suspicious inspection. Lady Forrest read the letter from beginning to end with a cruel smile on her red pouting lips, and then she refolded it, and carefully closed the envelope.

“That may go,” she said coolly, giving it to Jane; “it would be well he should get this, it’s full of Mr. Felix Dent, and she keeps all her grievances to herself. That letter is a strong card in our hands. How many has she written already?”

“She writes every three days, but only one has gone, you know—the first one,” was the reply.

“Well, keep your eyes open, Jane; we must push matters on now, for the girl will soon be quite sufficiently entangled with this young fellow to suit our purpose. Now, be off with you, I heard the library door shut, Sir Richard is coming up earlier than usual. Don’t forget a larger teapot to-morrow morning.”

Jane nodded again, and left the room without responding to Lady Forrest’s cheerful good-night. But as she pursued her way towards the portion of the house devoted to the servants’ sleeping-rooms, she muttered to herself,—

“They are a good pair, and that’s the truth; Bertie might have searched the world over before he found a woman so well suited to him. She has the pull over us in one thing, though, she looks as inno-

cent as a dove, with those tender eyes and childish dimples."

Having dismissed Jane, Ruth determined resolutely to follow out the advice she had given to her attendant, and banish from her mind the subject of their conversation; but, strive as she might, she found it altogether impossible to rid herself of the burden of undefined uneasiness with which she was oppressed. The certainty that her father intended to divide his fortune between her and her step-mother occasioned her not even a passing regret, for that seemed to her to be perfectly just, and having no desire for unlimited wealth her future would have appeared no brighter had her own share been doubled; but Jane's words, "If you weren't here she would have it all; you stand between my lady and fifty thousand pounds," despite herself haunted her, and rang in her ears.

Throughout the short night she lay tossing on her bed, sighing heavily from time to time, her heart beating and her temples throbbing; but presently the sun began to shine in through the chinks of her curtains, and then she rose,

and drawing up the blind let in the cheering rays.

The sky was full of soft fleecy pink clouds, which were still warmly tinged with the lingering tints of the newly risen sun, the whole gorgeous panoply of the heavens smiling and radiating with the promise of a glorious day. The dew sparkled on the lawn as though the fairies had visited it in the night, and sprinkled it with rainbow-coloured gems, and the birds twittered gaily as they sought their food among the bespangled blades of grass. Presently the beauty of the morning stole into Ruth's restless heart, and brought peace and comfort to her.

"Thank Heaven!" she murmured, with a sigh of profound relief,—“thank Heaven, the night is passed. Such black thoughts as those of mine were only fit for darkness. What a foolish girl I am! I am ashamed that a servant's gossip should have had power to conjure up such terrible scenes in my brain.”

She wrapped her muslin gown round her, and thrusting her bare feet into her slippers, sat on the edge of her window with her head leaning back

against the woodwork, gazing with dreamy eyes out into the brightness, and drawing in deep breaths of the sweet-scented air. By and bye she passed her hand over her brow, smoothing back the locks which clustered in little curls round the well-formed intellectual forehead.

"I have actually a headache," she murmured; "that comes of worrying myself about imaginary troubles. Ah, Jack, dear love, how long the time seems without you! Where are you now, I wonder, and are you thinking of me? For once I wish I had the power of raising phantoms, I could be reconciled even to seeing a ghost if it were your ghost. Well, I had better go to bed, and try and dream of you, my eyes feel heavy, and sleep may do my head good. God bless you, my darling, wherever you are, God bless you, and bring you safe back to me! I want you so badly—ah, nobody in this wide world knows how much I want you! To look into your dear blue eyes, and to feel the warm clasp of your hand, I would give my fortune willingly. Now, good-night, love, may we meet in dreamland!"

Ruth was soon sleeping soundly, but some thousands of miles away in Montreal, Jack lay with his eyes wide open, and his brow wrinkled with care.

“Confound it, how slowly the hours pass!” he muttered; “it is only four o’clock, there’s no chance of letters for three or four hours yet. If I don’t get one from her this morning I shan’t know what to make of it; how many have I written, I wonder?—six, I believe, and not a word in reply. It’s hard lines though, it really is. I have enough worry to turn my hair grey without this. My dear girl, there must be some mistake, she would never torture me like this, willingly. God grant she is not ill! But then if she were, her father would write; oh! I cannot understand it. It’s enough to drive a fellow off his head altogether.”

The hall clock was still chiming half-past seven, when Ruth’s door was gently opened, and Jane Hunter stole softly across the room towards the bed, with a cup of tea in her hands. Ruth was lying breathing heavily, with parted lips and flushed cheeks, her arms spread out on either side of her, the hands clenched tightly.

The woman compressed her lips, and nodded her head significantly as she gazed on the uneasy leeper.

"She's had a bad night," she muttered under her breath; "she's feverish, evidently; well, I suppose Belle reckoned upon that."

Raising the spoon she deliberately dropped it with a rattle into the saucer. Immediately, with a cry, Ruth started up in her bed, staring wildly and panting for breath. In an instant, however, the scared expression faded away.

"Oh, Jane," she sighed, "I am so thankful you woke me, I was having such a dreadful dream!"

"I am glad I did, then, miss," Jane replied softly. "I was just wondering whether I ought to, as my lady said you weren't to be disturbed on any account, but I thought you looked uncomfortable."

"I might well," Ruth responded with a dreary smile, "I have been through a good deal since I fell asleep, I can tell you. I have been murdered and drowned, and I was just going to expiate any amount of crimes on the scaffold when you came in. What have you there, Jane?"

"It's a cup of tea, miss, my lady fancied you weren't feeling very well last night, so she told me to bring it on the chance of your being awake. It is out of her own teapot."

Gratefully Ruth stretched out her hand.

"It is the very thing of all others I would have chosen," she said; "tell Lady Forrest I am very much obliged. If it wasn't for a lingering dread of Miss Harding, who had a horror of these little indulgences, I think I should always like a cup of tea in bed before I get up."

"I will tell my lady, miss, I dare say she will take the responsibility of scandalizing Miss Harding upon herself; not but what Miss Harding would think anything my lady did was right, she was regularly fascinated with her. Now, miss, if you'll drink the tea I will take the cup with me. It's rather cool, I am afraid."

"I don't regret that," Ruth replied; "I fancy I must be a little feverish, I am dreadfully thirsty."

Placing the dainty cup to her lips, the girl drained it eagerly, but when she returned it to the maid she made a slight grimace and shook her head.

"Was it too sweet, miss?" Jane asked.

"No, I don't think it was, but it didn't taste as pleasant as tea usually does. However, I expect it's the fault of my condition, not of the tea."

Lad Forrest was in her dressing-room when Jane returned with the empty teacup.

"Well?" the little lady said, pausing in her toilette.

"She tasted it," Jane answered, laconically.

"But she drank it?"

"Oh yes, she drank it this morning; she doesn't feel well, and fancies her mouth is out of taste."

"Ah, that's all right," the other replied, cheerfully, "we will moderate our transports to-morrow, one must get one's experience gradually. Now, then, Jane, I am ready for you. I should like to try my hair in some new fashion this morning."

"Then you can do it for yourself," was the uncivil rejoinder. "I have quite enough hair-dressing with Miss Ruth; my money isn't pleasantly earned, at any rate."

The little lady's eyes sparkled dangerously.

"It will be a good round sum though, Jane, and

your talents are not very marketable you must admit; however, I don't want to quarrel, it's a pity you and Bertie are so ill-tempered. You would both find life so much more agreeable, if you cultivated contented spirits, as I do."

But Jane Hunter slammed the door violently almost before she concluded, and Lady Forrest bit her red lips angrily as she muttered,—

"I can't do without her, and she knows it, but she's as disagreeable a creature as I ever came near."

CHAPTER XI.

WHEN Ruth came down stairs an hour later, her face was very pale, and there were dark rings under her eyes ; she could eat no breakfast, and, in answer to her step-mother's inquiries, she confessed she had a headache, which had increased since she rose ; that she had slept badly and had had unpleasant dreams. Lady Forrest was demonstrative in her sympathy, fussily so, Ruth considered, but Sir Richard was much pleased with his wife's anxiety on his daughter's account, and seeing this Ruth reproached herself for ingratitude.

Immediately after breakfast Herbert Westall and Felix Dent arrived ; and Ruth perceived, much to her annoyance, that Herbert had selected this particular day to devote himself in his own peculiarly offensive way to her. Her head still ached in a dull depressing manner, though not so acutely as it had

when she had first awakened ; she felt unreasonably irritable and nervous, too, therefore she had hard work to treat Mr. Westall even with her usual cold civility, nor did she feel in any way soothed when every ten minutes or so her step-mother came up with anxious inquiries as to whether she was better yet, or whether it would not refresh her if Bertie were to fan her.

Poor Ruth sighed for a release from her voluble worrying companions, and presently, when Arabella informed her she had ordered the pony-cart that Bertie might take them for a quiet drive, she felt positively desperate.

“I cannot drive this morning,” she murmured ;
“indeed I would much rather not.”

“But, my dear,” her father expostulated, “Arabella thinks it would do you good, and fresh air is an excellent thing for a headache.”

“I could not bear the shaking, but I don’t want to interfere with your pleasure, Arabella ; you and Mr. Westall go for your drive, and perhaps Mr. Dent will row me a little way on the river, I should like that better than anything,” Ruth suggested, somewhat eagerly.

Hereupon ensued an animated argument between the two young men ; Herbert Westall declaring that he would row Miss Ruth, and that Dent could escort Lady Forrest ; but Ruth would not listen to this arrangement, feeling that a *tête-à-tête* with Herbert that morning would be totally insufferable to her ; and even Sir Richard lifted his eyebrows in surprise as he heard his daughter declare in an irritated, impulsive manner, which was altogether opposed to her usual style, that unless Mr. Dent rowed her she would not go upon the water at all ; with which she took her hat, and without another word walked straight across the lawn in the direction of the boat-house, followed by Felix Dent, who seemed highly confused and uncomfortable.

For an instant or two after the young people had gone there was an embarrassed silence in the room, and then, glancing uneasily at his wife's grave countenance, Sir Richard said,—

“Ruth is evidently not at all herself this morning, I hope she will be better presently. Shall you be driving for long, my dear ?”

“I shall not go at all, Richard,” Arabella

answered, gravely ; “ it was only on Ruth’s account I proposed it. I will go and sit in the garden and work.”

“ And you, Bertie ? ” the Baronet said.

“ Oh, I shall have a little chat with Belle, and then return to town. I am evidently *de trop* here altogether ; Miss Ruth has given me quite a sufficient snubbing for one day.”

With a heavy heart and a latent sense of uneasiness, Sir Richard retired to his study, and for an hour or so resolutely read the paper. Presently he dropped it, and rising walked to the window and peered through his spectacles in search of his wife. Opposite him, across the lawn, was her favourite lounging-chair, with the bamboo table standing near with her work and magazines upon it. The lounge, however, was empty, and no sign of Lady Forrest was to be seen either to the right or left.

The Baronet considered a minute, and with another heavy sigh put on a slouch felt hat and walked out into the garden ; then, more bent than usual, he turned and proceeded feebly

towards the shrubby path leading to the boat-house.

But when he came in sight of the rustic seat he stopped abruptly.

Standing behind it, with her elbows resting on its back to steady herself, was his wife, gazing intently up the river through a pair of opera-glasses. Apparently she was deeply interested, for she did not seem to hear his footsteps until he was close to her, and then, with a start, she endeavoured to hastily conceal the glasses, her face glowing with confusion.

“What was interesting you so much, my dear?” Sir Richard asked.

“Oh, everything,” she replied, with a nervous laugh, looking keenly out of the corners of her bright eyes at his worried face. “I couldn’t settle to my work this morning, I am restless altogether, so I thought I would come down here. The river looks so gay, there are so many people out.”

They seated themselves silently, and presently the Baronet asked, with a poor assumption of coolness, whether she could see Ruth anywhere.

"Oh yes," she replied in some confusion, "I can see them."

"And are they coming home?"

"I don't think so," she faltered.

"You don't think so," he repeated irritably; "but surely you must know which way the boat is going?"

"Yes, dear," she responded gently, "I should know if they were in the boat."

"If they were in the boat, what on earth do you mean, Belle?"

She drooped her head, and clasped her hands nervously.

"They have not been rowing for the last hour, Richard," she murmured; "they went ashore when they had gone a short distance, and they have been sitting under a tree on the bank ever since."

Sir Richard received this information in a profoundly gloomy manner, and although for the next half-hour his wife did her best to soothe and amuse him, her exertions were entirely in vain, his face growing each instant more grim and angry.

The two were still there when Felix Dent rowed his boat into the bank.

"You did not go far, Ruth, after all?" Lady Forrest cried, running to the water's edge, and officiously offering her assistance, which the younger lady altogether ignored.

"No, I did not," Ruth answered curtly, leaning on Felix Dent's arm as she stepped from the edge of the boat; "I found that the motion of the water made me feel uncomfortable. I thought you were going out driving?"

"I altered my mind," Lady Forrest murmured; "can I do anything for you, dear? I am so sorry about your head."

"You can do nothing for me," Ruth replied, "except leave me in quiet. I will go and lie down now, if you will excuse me, father."

The Baronet murmured a gruff assent, and, thoroughly ruffled in temper, the worried girl crossed the lawn and sought the seclusion and peace of her own room. She saw that her father was again angry with her, but the reason for his annoyance did not occur to her; he had never in any way discouraged

Felix Dent, and the explanation of her conduct that morning was so very natural it did not strike her for a single instant that she had been doing wrong.

It was quite true that her headache had come on in distressing neuralgic waves directly the boat began to glide beneath her, but feeling a great disinclination to return home, at any rate until she could be certain that her step-mother and Herbert Westall had started, she readily agreed to Felix Dent's suggestion that they should go ashore in a neighbouring plantation and rest in the shade of the trees. She knew that he would let her be perfectly quiet, and there was something soothing to her strained nerves in the respectful, almost compunctious sympathy expressed in his face and manner.

Ruth sighed drearily when she reached her room.

"I cannot keep out of hot water, do what I will," she murmured. "Oh dear, I wish I didn't feel so cross and wretched. After all, there can be nothing seriously wrong with my father to-day; he cannot possibly continue angry because I wouldn't drive with Arabella and Herbert, and I have done nothing

else, except have a horrible headache. Perhaps I am mistaken after all," she continued, after a pause, "I am depressed and out of humour altogether, he may not be angry, it may be all my sick fancy."

But when Ruth came down to lunch there was no doubt at all about the Baronet's ill-humour, and she grew seriously alarmed as she noticed the cold suspicious glances which he cast at her from time to time. For an hour or more Sir Richard had been pacing his library from end to end; and, listening to the hurried footsteps, Lady Forrest had remarked calmly to Jane Hunter,—

"I think we have the poor old gentleman 'on toast' now, Jane. I fancy one other illustration of the attachment between the two interesting young people will about serve our purpose; it mustn't be for another week or two yet, though, because the tea hasn't had time to have any effect at present."

Sir Richard went to bed thoroughly miserable that night. His brain was altogether in a tumult, he hated and despised himself for suspecting his

daughter, and yet he could not banish the unpleasant impression from his brain. He could not persuade himself to speak to Ruth until his suspicions were confirmed ; there was something in her pure brave eyes which made an accusation of lightness of conduct almost an impossibility to him, but he lowered himself sufficiently to make up his mind to watch her, and, having come to this determination, he felt completely degraded in his own estimation.

The next morning Herbert Westall had his temper considerably ruffled ; on the breakfast-table in his shabby little sitting-room at Swan Street, South Hampstead, there lay a letter.

“Dent’s fist !” he exclaimed. “I wonder what the fellow wants now ? More cash, I suppose. Well, I can’t let him have it to-day. That game of pool cleared me out last night. The old man is getting a bit close with his purse-strings too, but I must screw something more out of him this week, since Belle’s running short. Upon my soul,” he grumbled, slitting the letter open savagely with his pocket-knife, “the business is a very tedious one ; but

women are always inclined to shilly-shally; not but what Belle and Jane are shrewder than the generality, that I will admit."

Westall poured himself out a cup of tea, and then, with his heavy lower lip thrust out, and a brutal frown on his face, he began to read Felix Dent's communication. He had scarcely perused a couple of lines before he uttered a violent oath, and by the time he had finished his blood-shot eyes were quite lurid with anger.

"Hang the fool!" he muttered, eating and drinking in a desperate hurry. "I must go and put pressure on with him, I suppose. It's confoundedly unlucky that I'm so short of money; a ten-pound note would have been the most forcible argument with a fellow like that."

With a savage scowl he glared round the mean, comfortless apartment, with its torn, crumb-strewn carpet and dirty window, and then he bit angrily at his bread-and-butter.

"Belle grumbles at the hardness of her life," he muttered, "but at any rate she hasn't to live in a filthy den like this. Why, the old diggings in Mel-

bourne were ever so much better, Jane did keep them clean at any rate. Sir Richard is a miserly old beggar or he wouldn't let his wife's cousin continue in such a place. I wonder why he doesn't ask me to stay at 'The Lodge.' Perhaps the old fellow's jealous. Well, I hope he is, he wouldn't have much comfort either in this world or the next if I had my way."

The letter from Felix Dent commenced without any superscription.

"I cannot go on in this matter, Westall; she trusts me, and every time I look at her I see myself in the light of such a thorough-paced scoundrel that I shudder. You must let me off my bargain; I will pay you back the money you advanced, upon my soul I will; I have found out that they will take me on again at the office, and I will live on bread-and-water, except the small sum I send my dear old mother every week, until I've paid you. Release me from my promise, for Heaven's sake, and let me try to get out of this slough of moral degradation. Tell me I need not go again to 'The Lodge';

I will not say I love her, I am too unworthy, but I respect her most truly, and when I am with her I feel that I am a vile reptile who is crawling in her path, upon whose head she would be justified in setting her foot. Let me hear from you at once.

“Yours,

“FELIX DENT.”

Finishing his meal as quickly as possible, Westall pulled a shabby blotting-case towards him, and taking up his pen wrote as follows, underlining the more important words with heavy ominous black strokes :—

“MY DEAR DENT,—Be careful how you play me false. You say the firm would take you back ; do you think they would do so if they knew that, but for my timely assistance, there would have been a deficiency of 120 pounds in your cash accounts when you left them a month ago ? They dismissed you for inattention to your duties only ; but you know perfectly well, if it had not been for the agreement that you entered into with me, for which I

paid you in advance £120, and for which, please recollect, I hold your I O U, that you would have been by this time waiting your trial in prison, with a cheerful prospect before you of penal servitude. Don't do anything in a hurry, take time to consider. These are your circumstances. I have letters of yours which would incriminate you in any court of justice, and these, I give you my word, I will forward to your old chief if you force me to do so. Understand this, you must go on or I speak out. After all you are earning your money easily; you are having a high old time at 'The Lodge,' and as I don't ask you to make love to the girl, your tender conscience need not disturb you, neither need you feel any responsibility upon you in the future whatever happens. We only want to get the girl out of the house; she interferes with my cousin's comfort considerably; she must leave voluntarily, however, and when she has gone all you will have to do is to deny that you know anything of her whereabouts. This, I imagine, you will be able to do with perfect truth. I repeat—Carry out your bargain and I am your friend in the future, but fail me and you will

be in prison, a self-convicted thief, in less than a week. I don't want to be hard on you, however, and if you are a little off the job just now, take a holiday. Don't forget, either, that dear old lady in the Scotch village, your mother, who is so proud of her boy; you couldn't do much for her if you were in quod. Go down to the sea, my boy, I will bring you a ten-pound note to-morrow morning, enjoy yourself, and get rid of these womanish qualms. This day fortnight I shall expect you to be at my disposal, and to meet me at 'The Lodge' in fit form and ready for a good canter with Miss Ruth. Make the most of the last weeks of your holiday, old fellow. I think I may safely promise you, you can get into harness again in a month's time if you desire to do so.

"Yours,

"B. W.

"P.S.—Burn this letter for your own sake."

The receipt of this communication plunged the unhappy Felix Dent into an abyss of misery, but

Herbert Westall knew the man he had to deal with, and when he went round to the young fellow's lodgings the following morning with ten pounds in his pocket, which he had emptied Lady Forrest's purse to obtain, besides borrowing a couple of sovereigns from the obliging Jane Hunter, he was not surprised to find his wretched victim ready to start in search of peace of mind with his port-manteau strapped in a corner of the room.

"That's right, my lad," Herbert cried with a cynical smile on his evil face, clapping the cowed young man on the shoulder. "Go away and be as jolly as you can; I wish I could join you, but I am tied here at present. Here's the needful, and don't look down in the mouth; I'll make your excuses at Polesworth. Don't let me know where you are going, and then if I inform Miss Ruth that you have run up to Scotland to see the Mater, I may be unconsciously telling the truth."

Felix Dent went to Dover the next morning, first writing to his mother, and enclosing a postal order for two pounds; big scalding tears dropped on to the paper as he wrote the loving words, and he

shuddered as he pictured his mother's agony should she ever come to know the truth of the son she trusted so entirely.

Rain fell heavily when he reached the seaport town, and a moaning wind swept over the sullen sea, presaging the coming of a storm, but Felix Dent could not rest in the unpretentious hotel to which he repaired; a feverish need of action was upon him, and he went out into the driving rain and pursued his way to the deserted pier, where he paced moodily up and down, getting drenched to the skin, heedless of the vivid flashes of lightning which seemed to enwrap him in a lurid embrace, and of the awful crashing peals of thunder. Once he stopped, and looking over at the hissing, curdling water, which the storm was rapidly churning into a white foam, muttered to himself,—

“If it wasn't for mother that would be the easiest way; life isn't worth much when a man comes to loathe himself, but it would break mother's heart to lose me; I must go to the end with it, I can't escape. After all, I don't suppose I shall be injuring Miss Forrest permanently; Rathbone will be back in a

few months, and then she will be all right ; he's not likely to be taken in with any cock-and-bull story. Still, it's a hateful business to have any hand in, and when she looks at me with those kind, grave eyes, I feel as if I wasn't fit to live."

From which it may be inferred that Felix Dent did not commence his sojourn by the sea in any holiday humour.

CHAPTER XII.

IF any one had told Ruth that being deprived of Felix Dent's society would prove a real trouble to her, she would not have believed it, but as the fortnight wore slowly away, she confessed to herself that she missed him terribly. Her father continued to treat her with marked coldness, while Arabella and Herbert were even less congenial than usual, not because they neglected her, but because they were for ever lamenting and trying to account for her pale cheeks and loss of spirits. Ruth was a mystery to herself even in this respect; her health had always been perfect hitherto, and it chafed and annoyed her seriously to suspect that her constant headaches and languid nausea were the result of mental worry. There was a sick longing upon her for news of Jack, but she was under the mistaken impression that she could not have heard sooner, and

therefore she chid herself for her unreasonable impatience. Her heart would have well-nigh broken had she known of the six letters which Jane had taken from the postman and carried to Lady Forrest to be carefully read by her and then destroyed.

But if Ruth was angry with herself for this pardonable weakness, her contemptuous indignation was immeasurably increased when she felt bound to admit, in the secrecy of her inner conscience, that her depression was considerably heightened by the absence of Felix Dent, who she believed had a real sentiment of friendship for her, and who was, although not interesting, invaluable to her as a means of avoiding other society less inoffensive.

She was much vexed, therefore, to feel the colour mount into her cheeks when Herbert Westall announced one evening that young Dent had returned to town that night, and had written to propose that they should pay a visit to 'The Lodge' the following morning; nor was she at all soothed when Arabella attracted attention to the blush which the first faint sensation of pleasure she had

experienced for many days had called into her countenance, by saying innocently,—

“Why, my dear Ruth, you are looking better this evening; I did not notice it before; see, Sir Richard, she has quite a pretty colour in her cheeks!”

Sir Richard did not seem to admire his daughter's roses, and the bloom faded out of her face very quickly under the influence of his icy, disapproving glance.

The next morning she woke with a lighter heart in her breast; for a minute she did not understand the cause of her improved spirits, but almost immediately she recollected Felix Dent, and then she knit her handsome brows and turned down the corners of her lips in self-condemnation. It would not do, however, in a minute she was smiling at herself.

“How foolish I am!” she murmured. “After all, why shouldn't I be pleased to see him? Poor fellow, even Jack wouldn't be jealous of him.”

Steps outside her door interrupted her here. “Come in, Jane,” she cried, “I am awake. Give me my tea, quick! For once I feel inclined to get up.”

But though Ruth urged her to increased haste, the woman appeared to hesitate strangely, and there was a slight tremble in her voice as she said,—

“You are better this morning, I hope ; you look quite bright.”

“I do feel better,” Ruth replied, cheerfully, “and I trust it will last to-day, but I often feel pretty well when I wake, and then, directly I start to dress, my head begins to ache, and I turn sick and faint.”

Jane was silent a minute, and then she remarked slowly,—

“Miss Ruth, do you think that your strange sensations can have anything to do with the tea ? ”

Ruth stared at her in astonishment. It was not the question, it was Jane’s hesitating manner of speech that was so peculiar.

“Tea never disagrees with me,” she answered, wonderingly.

“I know it doesn’t generally,” Jane continued hurriedly, “but this might ; that is to say,” she went on, in great confusion, “at this time of the morning tea is sometimes considered unwholesome.

I wish you would give up taking it, miss, really I do."

Ruth looked in surprise at her maid's earnest countenance, but after a minute's consideration she pushed the tray away.

"You may be right, Jane," she said; "at any rate I'll give your advice a trial; something is upsetting me, that's certain. I won't have any more tea in the morning. Perhaps," she went on, smiling, "my miserable sensations have been a judgment upon me for deliberately flying in the face of dear old Miss Harding's prejudices."

With a nod of the head and an effort at an answering smile, Jane turned away with the tray, but before she quitted the room she said,—

"Don't mention to my lady that you are leaving off your morning tea by my advice, please, miss. She would think me presuming, and I am anxious not to offend her, as you know."

Ruth gave the promise, though she thought Jane was unnecessarily cautious; a little later she admitted to herself that, supposing the maid wished to keep her place, she had been wise in warning her

young mistress not to mix her name up in the matter.

Lady Forrest raised her voice in so loud an exclamation of pleasure when Ruth entered, that Sir Richard laid down his newspaper with an irritable little frown. Seeing which, his wife said with an apologetic smile,—

“I am sorry, my dear, if I startled you, but I am so delighted to see our Ruth looking her own sweet self again. You have no headache this morning, Ruth, I am sure.”

“No, I haven’t,” the girl responded. “Do you know, Arabella, I have come to the conclusion what caused my headaches.” Lady Forrest paused with her cup half-way to her lips, and Ruth saw in some surprise that her hand trembled noticeably. “I feel sure it was the tea; I shall not take it any more.”

“You are not very gracious, Ruth,” Arabella muttered; “I meant to do you a kindness by sending you the tea, but it seems, according to what you say, that I have really been injuring you all the time.”

"I am sorry I mentioned it," Ruth responded, wondering at her step-mother's ebullition of temper.

"I am afraid, however, I am one of those that tea doesn't suit, and so I must give it up on everybody's account. I am sure, Arabella, you will admit I have been very dull lately."

"You have been out of spirits, certainly," Lady Forrest replied gently.

"Well, this morning I feel another creature, and I haven't taken the tea, *voilà tout*."

Ruth laughed, and at the unfamiliar sound Sir Richard lowered his paper, and glanced over the top at his daughter, but his questioning expression quickly changed to one of moody suspicion.

"It may be giving up the tea, as you say, Ruth," Arabella remarked, softly, "but we can't always account for improved spirits any more than we can for depression. Now, my dear, do you feel up to a ride this morning?"

"Quite," the girl answered brightly.

"Then you may as well go and put on your habit," Lady Forrest continued. "Felix Dent and Herbert will be here shortly, I expect, and I

promised them a canter this morning if it was fine."

At half-past eleven Arabella and Herbert Westall returned to 'The Lodge,' their horses panting and exhausted, and the riders considerably out of temper, to judge from their heated, injured countenances. Sir Richard met them in the hall. On seeing him his wife started violently, and then with a hurried greeting she endeavoured to pass him in the direction of the stairs, while Herbert stood with his eyes lowered, tapping his boot nervously with his riding crop.

"Where are the others? How comes it that they are not with you?" Sir Richard asked curtly.

The little lady looked appealingly at her cousin, but it seemed he was not inclined to help her, for, with a shrug of his shoulders, he walked out again into the sunlight, and stood looking up the avenue of elms.

"I don't know exactly where they are, my dear," Lady Forrest said, timidly, "but they will be home in a few minutes, I expect."

"You don't know where they are!" Sir Richard

thundered in great wrath ; “ did you not go the same way then ? ”

“ Why, yes, of course we did ; don’t be vexed, dear, I feel sure they did not intend to give us the slip. Ruth suddenly proposed a gallop. Their horses must have been fresher than ours, I suppose,—any way we couldn’t keep up with them. Don’t be cross with Ruth, Richard, please, it’s such a blessing to see her shake off her depression. I have not heard her laugh as she laughed this morning since Jack went away.”

Upstairs in her bedroom, attended by the devoted Jane, the fairy-like little lady took off her hot riding-habit, and then, throwing herself into her lounge, fanned her pretty flushed cheeks vigorously.

“ My arms are as stiff as possible,” she cried, smiling mischievously, and rubbing the rounded dimpled limbs, “ I thought that beast of a horse would have pulled them out of their sockets when Ruth and Felix started off. Now, then, Jane, go down and tell cook that I want an egg carefully beaten up in milk, and bring it to me here with the decanter of sherry. I am sure Miss Ruth will

want something when she comes in this hot morning. Oh, before you go just look and see if there is any sign of them."

Jane pulled the blind aside.

"There is no sign of them," she said grimly, "but Sir Richard has just turned into the trees at the side of the avenue."

"He is on the look-out for them," Lady Forrest said with a laugh; "poor old fellow, it is hard on him. I wish there was some other way of managing it, really, so far as he is concerned, but there isn't, so it's no good being squeamish."

Meanwhile the head groom, rubbing down one of the exhausted horses, muttered to his subordinate,—

"Well, Tom, in all my life I've never seen beasts in such a state after a morning's ride, and they was as fresh as paint, too, when they went out. Wash the Kaiser's mouth out carefully, boy, this ere's been pretty well dragged to bits. Folks like that Westall ain't fit to ride good horses. They've pulled 'em back till the poor beasts are pretty well fit to drop with vexation and fretting. I know the

look of a horse that's been treated in that way, it takes a lot more out of 'em than a stiff gallop."

Ruth enjoyed her ride thoroughly, nor was she at all sorry when, on arriving at the proposed goal, she found that Lady Forrest and her cousin were not to be seen following in their wake, the continuous sound of their hilarious voices being anything but soothing to her. For the first time for many a long day she felt at peace; the throbbing pain in her brows, which had been constant for a fortnight or more, no longer troubled her, and, relieved from its depressing influence, her brain seemed cleared. The hot mist that had made her eyes smart and had dimmed her sight, also had disappeared, and she found it possible to think happily even of her absent lover and the miles that divided them. Then, again, with Felix Dent by her side, there was the soothing consciousness of a friend at hand.

They had ridden out seven or eight miles, and on the return journey they were absolutely silent. Ruth indulging herself in a series of blissful recollections of her rides with Jack; and so absorbed

was she in her thoughts that she positively started when, as they passed slowly through the outer gates of Sir Richard's domain, into the long avenue of elms, Felix spoke for the first time for nearly an hour.

"I am afraid," he said, blushing painfully, "I have been a very dull companion, Miss Forrest, but I am much worried just now."

Ruth looked sympathetically into the wistful eyes that gazed so compunctiously into hers.

"I hope your worry is not connected with your mother?" she said.

"My mother!" he repeated in surprise.

"That you did not find her out of health," Ruth explained; "Mr. Westall told me you had gone to see her."

"No, she is well," he said shortly, "my worries are not connected with her."

"I am glad of that, at least, but I am sorry you are in trouble," Ruth said, kindly; "I should be glad to help you if I could; can I?"

Felix Dent shook his head sadly, and heaved so bitter a sigh that Ruth's heart quite ached for him.

Impulsively she leaned towards the young man, and placed her gauntleted hand upon his arm.

“Some day, perhaps, you may make up your mind that I can be of service to you,” she murmured. “When Mr. Rathbone comes home you will have a more capable friend than I am; but I am trustworthy, at any rate, if I am not worldly wise, and sometimes it is a consolation to tell one’s troubles to a sympathetic ear, even although we know we can gain no valuable advice.”

Felix Dent averted his eyes from the girl’s honest questioning gaze, and seeing how painfully ill at ease he was, she continued more lightly,—

“Any way, Mr. Dent, you need not apologize for your silence. I cannot tell you how grateful I am for a little quiet companionship. You must please take this for a very high compliment; it is the greatest possible comfort to me to know that I have a friend whom I need not exert myself to amuse, and who will not consider me rude however distrait and dull I appear.”

This was all that passed between the two, but the Baronet, peering at them unobserved from among

the trees which bordered the carriage-drive, noted his embarrassed face and her gentle glance of interest and sympathy, as with her hand upon his arm she inclined her figure towards his, and they talked earnestly in lowered tones. He let them pass him, and then he followed through the trees, trembling in every limb; but though his heart throbbed painfully and his forehead was clammy and cold, he still fought against the miserable conviction which was so rapidly gaining strength in his disturbed brain, and, clenching his fists, muttered between his teeth,—

“I cannot believe it, I *won't* believe it! She said she wrote to Jack yesterday. It would be too degrading! I would never forgive her—no, by Heaven! I would never forgive her!”

Leaning heavily upon his stick, Sir Richard Forrest walked slowly with drooping head in the direction of his home; as he neared the hall door the groom was leading away the horses, and he could hear his daughter's voice raised somewhat from her ordinary low melodious tones. Directly Ruth saw her father she went up to him.

“Father,” she said cheerily, “I want your help;

bring the weight of your authority to bear on Mr. Dent. He says he must leave us now, and I had quite set my heart on a game of tennis when it gets cooler."

But the Baronet's face was very grim as he answered stiffly,—

"Mr. Dent must please himself, my dear, if you cannot persuade him it would be utter waste of time for me to attempt to do so."

Ruth observed that her father's tone was ungracious, but she was becoming accustomed to this, and at this particular moment her attention was distracted from him to Felix Dent. It was quite evident to her that the young man was about to accede to her request, when she noticed him raise his eyes questioningly to Herbert Westall's ill-favoured face. Glancing quickly at Westall, she saw him shake his head with a scarcely perceptible frown, and thereupon Dent took up his hat again, and in undisguised confusion declared that he could not possibly stay, and with a hurried shake of the hand walked quickly out of the house.

Her face glowing with vexation, Ruth ran quickly

up to her room. Herbert Westall was a mystery, but she was disappointed in Dent; it seemed to her that he was pitifully weak as well as ungracious, and Ruth was altogether in an irritated frame of mind when she heard her step-mother's voice outside her door asking if she might come in. The girl gave the permission somewhat brusquely, but her conscience smote her a little when Arabella entered carrying with elaborate care a tumblerful of milk.

"It's so awfully hot, Ruth," she said plaintively, "I was quite done up when I came home. I have had some of this stuff, however, and it has picked me up splendidly."

"What is it?" Ruth asked.

"Egg and milk and sherry, do you like it?"

"Very much," was the grateful answer. "I am very thirsty, and, as you say, uncomfortably hot."

"I dare say," Arabella replied gently; "you went at rather too hard a pace for this sort of weather, I think. However, get your habit off as soon as you can, and then sit quietly for half an hour."

But when the luncheon gong had sounded twice,

and still Ruth did not appear, Lady Forrest sent Jane Hunter up to her.

“She has fallen asleep, perhaps,” she said gently to her husband. “I hope so, for she seemed done up altogether; when she came up to her room she looked as if she were on the point of having what we call a good cry, and that’s not Ruth’s usual style. However, I dare say the sleep will have refreshed her, it could only have been that she was over-tired. Nothing happened to vex her, I suppose?”

Sir Richard made no reply, but Herbert Westall, with a meaning glance at his cousin, said gruffly,—

“Well, she didn’t seem in a very good humour when she left us, I think she was put out because Dent wouldn’t stop.”

Hastily Lady Forrest interrupted him.

“Don’t be absurd, Bertie,” she cried, rather sharply; “it’s not likely Ruth was annoyed at that.”

But Ruth was not asleep when Jane Hunter came into the darkened room; she lay prostrate on her bed, with her muslin wrapper thrown around her, wracked with acute pain. Scarcely able to speak,

faint with nausea, she told the maid how it was with her, and that she could not possibly come down again.

Jane Hunter did not attempt to argue with her, but she placed the pillows more comfortably under the aching head, and carefully wrapped the silken coverlet round the girl's feet, which were icy cold notwithstanding the heat of the atmosphere. Then having drawn the curtains so as to exclude all the light, she went towards the door. On her way, however, she stopped, and uttered an involuntary exclamation.

"What is it?" Ruth moaned, the sharp sound reverberating in her ears.

"Nothing, Miss Ruth, nothing," the woman answered, lifting the empty tumbler as she spoke.

"Have you taken anything since you came in?"

"Some egg and sherry," Ruth murmured feebly.

"Who brought it to you, miss?" Jane persisted.

"Lady Forrest," the agonized girl replied. "Oh, Jane, go away, please. Every time I speak my brain feels as if it would burst."

Jane's face was very solemn when she entered the dining-room.

“Miss Ruth is very ill,” she said gravely; “she is lying on her bed, and her head is so bad she can scarcely speak.”

Nobody made any reply, but when the footman left the room five minutes later, Herbert Westall remarked grimly,—

“You women find headaches very convenient things, Belle, I wish we had a recognized ailment that we could fall back upon whenever we are a bit cross.”

“You are too bad, Bertie,” Arabella cried, indignantly, “I am not surprised that Ruth has a headache after tearing along as she did this morning.”

To which Herbert Westall responded,—

“Oh, that’s right, Belle; of course you’ll back her up, Jane’s just the same; it’s curious how you women all hang together in these matters. She’s cross about Dent’s going, and the tennis being knocked on the head, that’s the long and short of it.”

Sir Richard Forrest did not speak a word, but the anger within his breast burnt all the more fiercely because he smothered it so persistently.

“So far so good,” Lady Forrest remarked to Her-

bert, looking round to see that they were sheltered from all observation from the house by a belt of thickly growing shrubs before she accepted a cigarette from him and lighted it. "When does Felix Dent pay us another visit?"

"He won't come again, so you must push the business on. The fact is, I don't think he's quite safe, and in that case he's better away. I shall suggest his writing to apologize for his seeming rudeness in a day or two, so keep your eyes open for his letter; don't let it slip the Baronet's attention."

The little lady nodded, and shortly afterwards Ruth, still lying on her bed of sickness, heard in the distance her musical little cries as the game of tennis went for or against her.

Three or four days passed slowly away, and Ruth's indisposition grew even more marked. She could not eat, her cheeks grew thin and wan, and great black rings appeared under her eyes. Her father, with only the coldest show of interest, proposed sending for the doctor, but Ruth shrank from this, and she felt quite grateful to her step-mother for arguing so strongly against the idea, though she

could not agree with the little lady that the unusually hot season could be held altogether responsible for such obstinate depression and languor as she experienced; nor had she any hope that the dainty dishes and extra nourishment which Lady Forrest insisted on her taking would have any beneficial effect.

Arabella, however, was unremitting in her attentions, and although Sir Richard glowed with indignation at his daughter's dissimulation, he adored his wife for her tender consideration for the graceless, undeserving girl. The whole household, in fact, rang with praise of my lady, who each day braved the heat of the kitchen that she might prepare with her own hand little delicacies to tempt her step-daughter's failing appetite; and Miss Harding, in her turn, was quite carried away with admiration for Sir Richard's young wife, when one day she received a letter begging the old lady in the most respectful manner to give her the benefit of her long experience of her dear step-daughter, whom she seemed unable to please, try as she might.

In consequence of this Miss Harding wrote to her old pupil, and Ruth's spirits sank lower as she

perceived that her friend believed her to be simply the victim of ill-humour and jealousy.

The only person, in fact, who did not din into Ruth's ears her step-mother's perfections was Jane Hunter. This woman seldom spoke of my lady, but when she did so there was a curious ominous gravity in her manner, which in the midst of the girl's pain and mental confusion struck her as being strange and unaccountable. She was too ill, however, to seek any explanation of her singular tone, nor had she the energy to enter any protest against Jane's almost oppressive care of her.

A dozen times a day, notably after she had taken nourishment of any sort, the woman would come to her surreptitiously, and inquire in a furtive, anxious whisper how she felt; but at length a morning arrived when Jane Hunter's strange behaviour reached a culminating point, and through it Ruth was plunged suddenly into a positive abyss of shuddering terror.

END OF VOLUME I.

A
CRUEL DILEMMA

BY
MARY H. TENNYSON

AUTHOR OF
"LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY," "FRIEND FIDELITY,"
"PAID IN FULL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A CRUEL DILEMMA.



CHAPTER I.

ON the sixth day after Felix Dent's abrupt departure, Ruth lay on her step-mother's wicker lounge under the trees. The morning was terribly oppressive, and a hot, heavy mist hung over the river. Even the birds appeared dull and spiritless, as at long intervals they uttered a plaintive twitter which seemed to emphasize the universal depression under which all living things laboured, the very flowers hanging limp and listless on their stalks, as though life were difficult even to them under the blighting influence of the clouded sky and hot stifling atmosphere. Poor Ruth sighed as she dabbed her aching head with the eau de Cologne that stood near at hand.

"I wish the summer were over," she murmured sadly ; "it seems as though all strength or energy either of mind or body were being slowly burnt out of me. What a poor spirited creature I am, after all ; I feel as if I were fit for nothing but to lie here and doze away my life."

Here the sound of voices caused Ruth to lift her languid eyes. Her step-mother and Jane stood at the open French window of the drawing-room, and she saw that Jane was offering to relieve Lady Forrest of the small tray on which stood the invalid's eleven o'clock tumbler of egg and sherry.

Lady Forrest appeared to hesitate for an instant, and then with a bright smile at Ruth, and an encouraging nod of her pretty golden head, she relinquished her hold of the tray, and stood inside the window, watching the servant's progress.

For a yard or two Jane advanced carefully and slowly, and Ruth noticed that her lips were firmly compressed, and that there was an ominous expression of dogged resolution on her plain countenance which was altogether incomprehensible ; but when the maid had come within a dozen steps of her couch,

Ruth's perplexity changed to astonishment, and the astonishment became again a dread so intense that it almost suffocated her, and seemed to congeal the hot blood in her veins to ice. On reaching this spot the woman deliberately stumbled, and flinging the glass to the ground smashed it into a score of fragments, and then looked up at Ruth with so terrible a meaning in her eyes, that for an instant the girl imagined her heart had stopped, and that she was dying.

In a moment, however, it began to throb wildly, and springing from the couch, trembling in every limb, she went up to the lady's-maid, who had gone down upon her knees to pick up the fragments of glass which strewed the lawn. Before she could speak Jane interrupted her.

"Don't ask me any questions, Miss Ruth," she muttered, holding her head down; "go away, my lady is coming. Drink water at lunch to-day, it's better for you."

Scared out of all prudence, Ruth was about to ask for an explanation, when she felt herself pushed gently aside, and discovered her step-mother standing by her, her face lighted up with anger.

"You are too careless for my service," Lady Forrest muttered, addressing Jane; "you will leave me this day month. Now go to the kitchen and fetch me another egg and some milk."

"There are no more eggs, my lady," the woman answered grimly; "the dairyman forgot to leave any yesterday."

Lady Forrest's brow contracted in a sudden frown.

"You must have something else then, Ruth," she said.

But the girl, scarcely able to stand under the undefined and ghastly fear that was upon her, declared she was too oppressed and sick to swallow anything; and that she would go to her room and lie upon her bed for an hour or two, in the hope that she should be sufficiently recovered before lunch to come down and join them at the mid-day meal.

Lady Forrest made no protest against this, and once in her own apartment Ruth locked the door, and sinking into a chair, abandoned herself to a perfect paroxysm of nervous dread. By luncheon time

she had worked herself up into a fever, nor when the dinner hour arrived was she any better. Several times her step-mother came to her door, and when the sweet silvery tones fell upon her ears the girl shrank and clasped her mouth with her burning hands lest a cry of terror should escape from her lips.

“Leave me to myself,” she moaned distractedly ; “pray leave me to myself. I will see no one but Jane, send her to me.”

But as the evening wore away and the shades of night fell, and still the maid did not come near her, the girl repented of her want of caution.

“I have put her on her guard,” she gasped ; “she will keep Jane away, and then what will become of me? Heaven forgive me, I have not prized Jane’s friendship as I should.”

With her ears on the strain, shivering from time to time, Ruth sat close to the locked door ; presently she heard the hall door being barred and bolted for the night, and after a while the servants passed her room on their way to their own apartments. She recognized Jane’s slow, somewhat

heavy, step distinctly, but the maid did not pause on her way, nor did Ruth dare to call out lest she should attract the attention of her step-mother, who would doubtless be on the look-out to interrupt any meeting between them. She made no attempt to go to her bed, however, she knew that to sleep would be an absolute impossibility ; she determined to wait for daylight, and then, when she could feel assured that the inmates of the house were sleeping soundly, she would emerge from her room, and try to find Jane ; risking the chance of waking the under housemaid, who she knew shared the lady's-maid's spacious attic.

Another couple of hours passed slowly away, and still Ruth sat motionless in the darkness. She had put the gas out to appear as if she were sleeping, for fear her step-mother might make her wakefulness an excuse for having the lock burst open ; but she had not lowered the blinds, and the moonlight shining into the room fell across her pale haggard face, bringing into prominent relief the hollows in her cheeks and the feverish glitter in her scared eyes.

Presently, however, a muffled sound attracted her attention, and placing her ear to the key-hole she heard stealthy steps approaching along the passage, and an instant afterwards a soft tap at her door, and a stifled whisper in Jane's unmistakable voice.

Shaking as though an ague had seized upon her, Ruth unlocked the door and drew her false friend quickly in; then with an agonized murmur the poor girl threw herself upon the woman's breast, clinging to her, and sobbing and moaning in frenzied excitement.

Even Jane Hunter experienced a qualm of conscience as she felt her victim quivering in her arms, but she stifled the softness resolutely.

"Miss Ruth," she said, "I could not come to you before, for my lady kept watch during the evening, and was long in going to sleep, but I thought you would be listening for me."

"Oh, Jane," the girl cried, still holding her hand,—"oh, Jane, what did you mean? All day I have sat here thinking, until I fancied I should have gone mad! What did you mean by looking at me like that, and why did you break that glass?"

The woman waited for an instant, and then she muttered in low thrilling tones,—

“Cannot you guess, Miss Ruth?”

“I daren’t guess,” Ruth replied distractedly; “my mind is full of the most horrible doubts and suspicions. Tell me the truth, anything is better than this awful uncertainty.”

“I am afraid to tell you,” Jane murmured, “you are so excited now, and after all I cannot prove that my suspicions are at all justifiable.”

By a supreme effort Ruth checked her wild hysterical sobs, and clenching her fists resolutely, continued more firmly,—

“Tell me what you mean. I must know; you need not fear, I shall not give way again; with you by my side I do not feel so utterly abandoned and forlorn.”

Jane Hunter winced.

“Miss Ruth,” she replied slowly and distinctly, “I am afraid my lady is a very bitter enemy of yours, so bitter that your life is not safe here.”

Ruth began to tremble again.

“Merciful Heavens!” she panted. “It is true, then! You think she is trying to poison me?”

The woman placed her strong arm round the shuddering figure, and continued in hurried, earnest tones,—

“I do think so, Miss Ruth; I have feared it for some time, now I am certain. Everything points to the same conclusion. I dropped that glass as a test to-day, and you saw what happened. My lady controlled her rage, but it was blazing in her eyes, and she gave me my notice.”

Ruth groaned, and clutched her companion’s arm despairingly.

“I doubted my lady when I saw how ill you became after taking the tea she prepared,” Jane continued, “and my doubts were strengthened when I heard how angry she had been the morning you informed her of your intention to give it up. I watched her that day like a cat, but she sent me out of the way while she prepared the egg and sherry for you after your ride. You were ill that evening, you recollect, but I could not be sure that your gallop in the sun was not accountable for that; now, however,

I feel quite certain, and I dare not let you continue any longer in ignorance. Miss Ruth, you stand between Lady Forrest and fifty thousand pounds; your father is in very feeble health, it is scarcely likely he will live long. You are in my lady's way, I say, and although I can prove nothing, I am convinced that your situation here is a terribly dangerous one."

With a moan the girl sank into her chair again, and looked despairingly into the woman's grim face.

"What can I do?" she gasped. "Oh, Jane, what can I do? I am in her power altogether; my doom is certain; I must eat and drink or I shall die!"

Placing her hand on her young mistress's shoulder, Jane bent over her and continued earnestly,—

"Miss Ruth, you must not give way, you are under a terrible cloud now, because your energies are being slowly sapped by some drug which is being administered to you; but you have a strong clear brain, and you are not the sort of person to allow yourself to be crushed without struggling against it. Recollect you have Mr. Jack to think of as well as yourself."

The unhappy girl wrung her hands convulsively.

“You torture me !” she cried. “What can I do ? If I drank nothing but water, and ate bread only, she would find some way of accomplishing her deadly purpose.”

“Would it be any good applying to Sir Richard, do you think, miss ?” Jane said, knitting her heavy brows in deep thought.

Ruth started, but she shook her head sadly.

“He would never believe it,” she moaned, “and we have no proof.”

“That’s true,” Jane replied ; “I am afraid Sir Richard is a very slender reed to lean upon in this case. He is blindly infatuated with my lady, there is no doubt about that, and he seems to be displeased with you.”

The maid stopped suddenly and listened eagerly.

“I must go,” she said quickly, “I hear some one moving in my lady’s room. Think, Miss Ruth, think what must be done ; you are clever, there must be some way. Mr. Rathbone will be back in December, and then he will take care of you ; it is the

next four or five months only that you need be anxious about. Good-night, I will come again at the same time to-morrow if she keeps me away from you during the day. Ask for chocolate at breakfast, the cook will make it and send it straight to you. Now I must not stay another instant lest she should find us together."

Crossing swiftly to the door, Jane unlocked it, and closing it gently behind her, walked quietly towards her own room.

"I wonder whether I have suggested the idea to her," she muttered. "The proposal would come better from her, but if she doesn't rise to it, I must put it more plainly to-morrow."

Left to herself, Ruth relocked the door, and then, after a minute's consideration, she removed her dress, and, first bathing her face and neck in cold water, let down the masses of her luxuriant hair, and seating herself began mechanically brushing it.

"I must quiet my brain somehow," she murmured; "it is useless my attempting to think until I have calmed myself a little."

For half an hour she brushed away steadily, and

then wrapping herself in her dressing-gown, she commenced to pace her room slowly. Presently she began to shudder painfully, but as the weakness seized her, she bit her pale lips, and knitted her brows.

“I will not give way,” she muttered; “she shall not triumph in her wickedness. Oh, Jack, my dear love, if you had come back to find me in my grave! Oh, cruel, cruel! She would have killed me, and broken your heart; but, my darling, she shall not succeed. I am fighting for you as well as for myself!”

The daylight was flooding the room when at length Ruth paused in her ceaseless pacing to and fro, and removing the rest of her clothes crept into her bed, and laid her bewildered head upon her dainty lace-trimmed pillow. Deliberately she folded her hands tightly across her bosom.

“I *will* sleep,” she muttered sternly; “I can make no further plans now, and I must husband my strength.”

Then the sternness faded out of her pale face, tears gathered in her eyes, and raising her clasped hands on high Ruth cried with quivering lips,—

“ Oh God, help me, send me sleep or I shall go mad ! Help me, help me, for Jack’s sake ! ”

The result of Ruth’s anxious consideration was this conviction. Unless her step-mother’s deadly project could be interrupted, she would be dead before many weeks passed away, for in the new light that had been thrown upon it, her indisposition could no longer be thought of as a trifling one ; and recognizing her awful circumstances, and perceiving clearly the terrible difficulties by which she was surrounded, she groaned aloud.

In the first place, to tell her father of her suspicions against his wife was altogether out of the question. She was assured in her own mind that he would not credit her for a single instant, and taking into consideration the awful misery he would endure if such a thought could be instilled into his doting brain, Ruth could not bring herself to wish he should believe her horrible story, and with a sad shake of her head she decided that she would herself bear anything sooner than reduce him to a condition of wretchedness with which her own present sufferings could not compare.

“He loves her,” she murmured to herself; “I know what love is. I dare not tell him. If he believed it it would kill him, and if he did not, my doom would be all the more certain. No, there is only one way: I must get away, I must hide myself. Jane will help me to do that, and I will cable to Jack to come to me at once. He will start immediately, I know, and then he will protect me from all harm.”

Having come to this conclusion, the agony of fear, which at the first moment of her ghastly discovery had almost paralyzed her, faded out of Ruth's brain. But there were still many very serious difficulties before her, one of the principal being that she was particularly short of money. Her father had given her her usual liberal quarterly allowance four or five weeks previously, but coming in contact with a distressing case in the neighbourhood, in which a young working man had been ordered abroad as the solitary chance of saving his life, she, unknown to Sir Richard, had offered to bear the expense of his voyage, and retaining for her own use a single ten-pound note, had

sent the remainder to young William Morgan's mother.

Ruth had anticipated some slight personal inconvenience from her liberality ; but now the lack of money was a severe inconvenience to her, for altogether, with what remained from her former quarter's allowance, she had only nine pounds in her possession. She had, however, some rather valuable trinkets, and reckoning on Jack's coming to her assistance, she felt it would be quite possible to manage, with reasonable economy, until that blessed time arrived.

For herself, then, once safely out of the house, she saw no reason for any particular alarm, except the fear of being discovered by her father. She was very ignorant of legal matters, but she was under the impression that her father would have the support of the authorities in forcing her to return to her home should he find out her hiding-place ; and once under his roof again, with her step-mother on guard, she knew that getting away a second time would be quite impossible. She trusted, however, that, in the mighty vortex of London, she

would be able to escape discovery for the few weeks that must elapse before Jack came, and had it not been for the terrible position of her deceived father, she would not have allowed herself to despond.

For her father Ruth's heart ached with an almost agonized intensity. Look forward as bravely as she might, she could not see any comfort where he was concerned. His affection for her had never been demonstrated warmly, but until lately he had treated her with uniform gentleness and kindness, and although she knew that the love she felt for him could not compare with the intensity of her affection for her dead mother, still she had revered and respected him most sincerely, and until Jack had shown her what true love meant, he had been first with her in all things. Now the idea of leaving him was a terrible one; it was obviously impossible for her to give him a real explanation of her conduct, and she perceived at once that any pretext less strong would be a very inadequate excuse for a young girl's leaving her rightful protectors and concealing from them her whereabouts. That Sir Richard would be mortally offended with her was

a positive certainty, and that his pride would suffer severely was also a foregone conclusion, but in his case it was apparent it was only a question of more or less suffering, and, judging him by herself, Ruth decided that although he would grieve for her, his sorrow on her account would be as nothing compared to the misery he would endure if his faith in his wife were destroyed.

Therefore at length she arrived at this determination. Sir Richard must remain in doubt, as far as she was concerned, for a few months, but directly she became Jack's wife she would return with her husband and plead for her father's forgiveness. For the Baronet's life she had no fear; he was certainly very feeble, but so he had been for some years past, and she could well believe his unscrupulous wife might prefer to wait for the natural course of events in his case to running the awful risk she was prepared to brave where Ruth herself was concerned.

CHAPTER II.

THE whole of the next day Ruth kept in her room, appearing to doze each time her step-mother came to the side of her bed to ask her how she did. She was, in truth, suffering severely from the terrible shock she had sustained, but her principal reason for remaining where she was, was her dread of taking any food with which her step-mother had tampered, and the difficulty of refusing to make an effort to eat in her father's presence was obvious. Throughout the day nothing passed her lips except a little aërated water and some wafer biscuits, and when night arrived, and once more she heard Jane's stealthy step approaching, she was thankful to see the woman enter bearing in her hands a plate containing some cold chicken and bread, and a large glass of claret.

Jane placed the food before the half-famished

girl, who had eaten nothing since breakfast time the previous day, saying grimly,—

“The cat will get into trouble with cook to-morrow morning, Miss Ruth; I have been thinking about you all day, but I daren’t make any effort to bring you anything before, for my lady has scarcely let me out of her sight. Now don’t talk until you’ve eaten, you look pretty well starved, and no wonder.”

The food refreshed Ruth greatly, and Jane Hunter, despite herself, was forced into a genuine feeling of admiration for her courage and resolution when, perfectly calmly, and with no bitter words or repinings, the girl informed her of her determination to quit her father’s roof, and suffer any privations herself, even to the entire loss of his affection, sooner than run the risk of breaking his heart with the knowledge of his wife’s perfidy.

When Jane left her an hour later this arrangement had been made between them:—The woman was to apply to her mistress for leave of absence for a few hours the following morning, for the ostensible purpose of visiting a servant’s agency in London;

but with the real intention of securing for Ruth a couple of rooms in a respectable but unfashionable and unattractive neighbourhood. Having procured the rooms, she was to cable to Jack on Ruth's account the words, "Come at once," giving the address of the new apartments.

It was further decided between them that, in order to put her step-mother off her guard, Ruth should come down to breakfast the following morning, drinking chocolate that Jane undertook to superintend the making of, and eating nothing but dry toast. At luncheon time the girl was to ask for a boiled egg and toast, and drink aerated water only, and before dinner, if Jane had succeeded in her quest, she was to make the effort to leave the house.

The difficulty of speaking with Jane on her return from town without arousing the step-mother's suspicions, was to be surmounted in this way:—Jane was to write a letter directing Ruth how to proceed, for it was obvious to both of them that the girl must make her escape alone; the lady's-maid would give this letter in a blank envelope to the mother of

the young man whom Ruth had befriended, and who was known to the servants as a *protégée* of their young mistress, this person would address it, and deliver it at 'The Lodge.'

But though the girl was able to make her plans so coolly, and was even astonished herself at the clearness with which she perceived and smoothed away the difficulties that lay in her path, and the courage with which she looked forward to the dreary lonely weeks that must intervene before Jack could come to her rescue, her heart sank and her knees trembled under her when she descended on the morning after her momentous interview with Jane Hunter, and found her step-mother standing by the breakfast-table with a letter in her hand. Sir Richard, his yellow face flushed with anger, was looking over her shoulder, but no sooner did he perceive his daughter than, to Ruth's dismay, he left the room, bestowing upon her an angry frown, and saying abruptly to his wife,—

"Send my breakfast to the study, please, I prefer to take it there."

Ruth's eyes filled with tears ; with the new deter-

mination in her mind it was doubly painful to her to perceive how low a place she occupied in her father's estimation; but, on the other hand, it strengthened her in her resolution, since it was evident that from him she could hope for absolutely nothing in the way of protection.

Quite silently, avoiding her step-mother's eyes, she took her seat at the table, and then, to her surprise, Lady Forrest handed to her the letter she had been examining so carefully when Ruth entered.

"This is for you, from Felix Dent," she said, coldly. "I know the handwriting."

Hastily Ruth prepared to open the envelope, for she was somewhat curious to know what the young man could have to say to her, but happening to raise her eyes for an instant, she saw her step-mother regarding her so fixedly that she changed her mind, and putting the letter into her pocket, determined to read it later on when she should be by herself.

"I don't suppose there is anything in the least important in it," she thought; "but it is horrible to be stared at like that, and it is just possible I may not want to show the letter to her."

Lady Forrest made no remark on Ruth's proceedings, and for the rest of the meal the two preserved an ominous silence.

On the conclusion of breakfast Ruth went to her room and began packing the hand-bag, which was all the luggage she dared take with her, while Lady Forrest pursued her way to her husband's study, and entering, found him with his elbows on the table, and his face concealed in his hands. Hearing his door open he raised his head sharply, and looked up with glittering, miserable eyes.

"Well," he said, "what's the letter about?"

"I don't know, dear," his wife replied, soothingly; "nothing particular, I expect; she did not read it before me."

With a muttered oath the old Baronet rose stiffly.

"I must speak to her!" he cried. "I can't let this sort of thing continue; it's perfectly disgraceful."

There was genuine anxiety in Lady Forrest's face and tone, as she laid her hand gently on his arm.

“My dear,” she cried, “what would you do? This letter may mean nothing after all; young people correspond now very differently to what they did in your time; don’t enrage Ruth, pray; she is a very proud girl, she won’t endure unmerited suspicion; it would be the very way to drive her to something desperate. Wait, my dear, pray wait, until you have something more tangible to go upon.”

With a groan the Baronet sank into his chair again, and the little lady leaving him, muttered to herself,—

“That was a near shave and no mistake; those two mustn’t be allowed to have any confidential chats, that’s certain.”

Once more safe in her room, Ruth took out Felix Dent’s letter and read it carefully through, laying it down at length with an expression of keen disappointment; she had not expected anything brilliant from Felix, but there was a want of genuineness about his letter which struck her very forcibly.

“Why did he write at all,” she murmured, “when it was evidently so distasteful to him to do so? It would have been better to have made no apology,

than to have excused himself in this lame fashion. Well, I should be more sorry than I am if I were not going to leave my home; as it is, I must have given up his friendship, any way."

Ruth forced herself to think and even to speak stoically, but she knew that when the bitter moment arrived it would be an awful wrench to quit the home of her childhood. So long as she had something to occupy her, she contrived to bear up bravely, but when she had finished her packing, and there was nothing to do but to await Jane's instructions, such a profound, forlorn sensation of self-pity crept over her, that the tears began to roll down her cheeks, and her breast heaved convulsively.

"It is hard, it is hard," she moaned, "to be banished from my mother's home, to be robbed of my father's love, and to be turned adrift into the cold world for no fault of mine too; Heaven knows she should have the money, I would give it her willingly, every farthing, if she would only let me live at peace."

Only a few minutes, however, did Ruth indulge her grief.

“I am foolish,” she muttered, “if I begin to pity myself I shall not have strength to go through with it, I must harden myself for the present, at least ; one needs all one’s courage, and all one’s calmness too, to oppose such an implacable foe as mine. I will sit here no longer. I can do nothing until I hear from Jane ; I will go and say good-bye to the flowers, and the trees, and the river. Ah me, when shall I see them again, I wonder ? ”

Each familiar beloved spot was visited by Ruth in turn : the stables, which she left quickly, afraid to trust herself to remain when her own favourite horse rubbed its nose tenderly against her sleeve, and whinnied affectionately ; the old sun-dial, which had been the subject of her first pencil-drawing ; the boat-house, nothing was forgotten. Her eyes were dry, for she would not give way, but they were strained and fevered when at length she returned to the house, carrying in her hand a spray of heliotrope she had gathered in one of the greenhouses from a tree which her mother had reared, and which her father declared bore blossoms with a more

delightful scent than any other plant on the premises.

Her aching heart fluttering in her breast, Ruth stopped at the study door, and, having first nerved herself up desperately, entered. Without any pause she walked to her father's side, and laid the flower upon the desk in front of him.

"It is from mother's plant," she faltered, bending over him. "Oh, father, for mother's sake kiss me, and say a kind word to me; my heart is nearly broken!"

The old man winced; there was an intensity of suffering in his daughter's tones that made his own heart throb painfully, and as he sat with bent head hesitating what to do, the scent of the flower invaded his senses, and with the delicate aroma came recollections of other days, when his young daughter was still dear to him, and when another beloved hand had laid upon his desk similar blossoms.

With a half sob, he took the flower in one trembling hand and held the other to Ruth. Quickly she bent her head for his kiss, but as his

quivering lips touched her cheek the door of the library opened, and Lady Forrest appeared upon the threshold.

“Ah, dear child, you are here!” she murmured. “I am glad to see that, Ruth; oh, don’t go—cannot you find a corner in your heart for me too?”

With an involuntary shudder of abhorrence, which she was altogether powerless to subdue, Ruth ran quickly from the room, not daring to speak lest the awful truth should force itself from her, and her father be stricken to death by the blow; and as the girl fled up the stairs, her step-mother placed her arm round the old man’s neck, and whispered lovingly,—

“Don’t fret about it, Richard, things must come right in time. Some day she will do me justice, never fear. Poor girl, I am sorry for her; we might be so happy together if she would only believe in my desire to be her friend.”

Before she reached her room Ruth was stopped by the upper housemaid.

“I have been looking for you, Miss Ruth,” she

said. "Mrs. Morgan, William's mother, brought this ten minutes ago."

Ruth took the letter from her hand.

"Is Jane back?" she asked.

"No, miss; I wish she were, for my lady does nothing but ring and ask for her. She's to go to her dressing-room directly she comes in."

"That's to keep her from me," Ruth thought, as with flushed cheeks she turned the key in her door. "Well, we have baffled her so far. Oh, my father, my poor father! Thank Heaven, he did kiss me!"

The letter was from Jane. It ran:—

"MY DEAR MISS RUTH,—

"Everything is prepared for you. I have found two rooms which I think will serve your purpose for a few weeks. They are in D——Square, Islington, not far from King's Cross Station. The landlady seems a respectable woman, and I have described you as a Miss Martin, a governess who is looking out for a situation. You will have to pretend that your luggage has gone astray, for she would naturally think it odd for you

to arrive with so little. There is a train leaves our station at 3.50 ; you had better try to catch that, for my lady will probably be resting in her room at that time. I wish I could do more for you, but I cannot ; it would not be safe for me to speak to you again before you leave the house. I sent the cable to Mr. Rathbone ; you will probably have an answer in a day or two, but at any rate you may feel sure he will start for England at once, and should be here in about a month if the voyage is ordinarily good. Good-bye, dear miss ; when I leave here I shall come and see you ; I dare not do so before, because it is more than likely my lady will have me watched when I go out, and above all things you must not write to me either, *in case* the letter should fall into her hands ; I will watch the postman as closely as I can, and if a letter from Mr. Rathbone should come I will try my best to get it, and send it on to you. Good-bye again, dear miss ; I hope you will be able to bear up under your heavy trials. The landlady's name is Mrs. Burton. Yours, with deep respect and sympathy,

“JANE HUNTER.”

The effect of this letter was to throw Ruth into a positive fever of excitement. Already it was two o'clock; the gong was sounding for luncheon, and in a little more than an hour she must start.

It seemed to the anxious girl that no meal ever took so long as did the luncheon at 'The Lodge' that day, and an icy shiver ran through her, as Lady Forrest pressed upon her, so persistently that even the morose silent Baronet at length expressed irritation and impatience, a certain cooling summer drink which she had herself concocted at considerable pains during the morning, having observed that her dear step-daughter had refused wine of all sorts the day before.

Try as she might, Ruth could not decline this beverage at all in her natural manner; in fact she found it difficult to reply at all, so intense was her horror of the cruel, callous creature, who sat looking into her face with smiling lips and lustrous, star-like eyes. Even to herself her voice sounded singularly harsh and forbidding, as with shaking hand she pushed away the tumbler in which refresh-

ing-looking lumps of ice bobbed up and down in a clear golden-tinged liquid.

"I have soda-water," she gasped. "I do not want this—I won't drink it!"

With a wrathful frown Sir Richard brought his clenched hand down upon the table.

"Good Heavens, Belle," he cried, "do let Ruth sulk if she feels inclined to; my life's made a perfect misery to me with all this fuss!"

"Oh, Richard," Lady Forrest murmured plaintively, "I didn't mean to worry you, dear, only I know Ruth would like this if she would only try it. it is an Australian drink."

But Ruth, unable to articulate, merely shook her head, and Sir Richard stretching out his hand, with an angry glance at his trembling daughter, seized the rejected glass.

"Very well, then, Ruth," he said harshly, "since you are so ungracious I will treat Arabella more courteously," with which he raised the tumbler towards his lips.

With an involuntary stifled cry, Ruth sprang to her feet, but before she could reach his side to dash

the glass from his hand, Lady Forrest had stopped him drinking.

“Wait, Richard, wait!” she cried quickly.

The old man paused, regarding his wife and daughter with undisguised surprise, and Lady Forrest continued, coaxingly, “Give it to me, my dear, if you please.”

In great perplexity Sir Richard placed the tumbler in the outstretched fingers, which closed upon the glass firmly; then, with a relieved laugh, his wife placed it out of his reach, saying merrily,—

“No, my dear, if Ruth won’t have it, I will. A man wouldn’t half appreciate its delicate flavour. I should never have taken the trouble to make it for myself; but, for all that, I am not too proud to take Ruth’s leavings. Keep to your claret, my dear, this is nectar, only fit for Gods and women. I shall take it up to my room with me and have a thoroughly jolly cool time in my dressing-gown, with some strawberries and a novel, which will make me perfectly happy until I go to sleep. Follow my example, Ruth, a doze will do you good,

and perhaps between tea and dinner we can have an hour's canter. Bertie will be here, and you must get up an appetite somehow, for I warn you, if you don't eat the sweetbreads I have been preparing on your account entirely, I shall be awfully hurt. Cook told me that sweetbreads were your favourite food; there's just a tiny dish which is to be devoted to you, and if you don't devour every morsel of it, I shall begin to think all sorts of queer things. Now I'm off, to enjoy myself. Good-bye, dear people, for the present!"

Ruth waited until she heard the study door close on her father, and then, without another moment of hesitation, she ran swiftly up to her room. As she passed her step-mother's apartment, she heard her talking energetically to Jane.

"Jane is back, then," she murmured; "I should like to have thanked her for all her goodness to me, but she will understand that that is impossible."

Glancing at the clock, Ruth saw that in ten minutes she must start. Putting on a large lace hat with a wide brim which shaded her face, she opened her writing-case and wrote hastily,—

“MY DEAR FATHER,—

“I am afraid that you will never forgive me for what I am doing. I cannot agree with Lady Forrest; you do not know how cruelly she tries me. I may be ill-tempered, but I cannot live any longer with her, and therefore I am leaving my home. Before long I shall be married, I hope, and then, with my husband by my side, I will come and beg your forgiveness. God bless you, my dear father; it grieves me to bring this trouble upon you, but my life has been absolutely unendurable lately. Don't worry on my account, I shall be quite safe; but I cannot tell you where I am going to live in case you should desire me to return to you. Don't harden your heart against me, I am very, very unhappy.

“Your affectionate daughter,

“RUTH FORREST.”

Sealing this letter carefully, Ruth laid it on her dressing-table, where she knew it would not be discovered for a couple of hours at any rate, for she had given particular instructions that she was not to

be disturbed until afternoon tea, and then, seizing her bag, she emerged from her room and ran boldly down the stairs and through the hall out into the scorching sunlight.

She encountered no one on the way, all the servants being at dinner, nor was there any one to be seen at the gate-keeper's cottage ; without an interruption of any sort she pulled the small side-gate open, and the next minute stood upon the dusty high road, an alien from her father's home.

CHAPTER III.

WITH lowered head and beating heart, Ruth stepped out briskly in the direction of the station, but before she had accomplished half the distance she was obliged to stop and put down her heavy bag, while, gasping with heat, she wiped her burning forehead and cheeks.

"This proves how much my strength is reduced," she murmured, panting painfully. "I should not have been long for this world but for Jane, that's certain."

She was trembling with exhaustion and heat, when, at length, she turned into the narrow asphalted walk which led directly to the station. Here she was forced to pause once more to rest her aching arms, and as she lifted her head after placing her bag on the ground, she uttered an involuntary exclamation of annoyance. Approaching her along

the narrow footpath was Felix Dent, his face suffused with blushes and his eyes averted.

Scarcely touching her hand, his face growing rapidly paler and paler, Felix Dent acknowledged her somewhat cold greeting, and then pointed to the bag.

"Are you going to the station?" he asked, his lips twitching painfully.

"Yes," Ruth answered shortly. "I will say good afternoon now, I have not too much time."

Picking up the bag without a word, Felix turned away and walked on in front of her.

"Do not come with me, please," she said earnestly. "I can manage quite well by myself."

"If you are to catch the 3.50 train you have only five minutes," he said shortly, "you could not do it with this heavy bag."

Not another word did he utter, and excited and heated though she was, having almost to run to keep up with his long rapid strides, Ruth wondered to herself at the singular impoliteness of his manner when offering her his assistance; but she had no time to expostulate with him, nor to decline his services

in securing her ticket. The train already stood by the platform, and the station-master, knowing her, delayed it for the necessary two minutes occupied by Dent's running to and from the booking-office. Ruth was vexed that she should have been made so conspicuous by this, but before she reached London she had come to the conclusion that, after all, it was not a matter of much importance, since she could scarcely have hoped to leave the station unobserved.

Arrived at Waterloo, however, scarcely had the train come to a stand, than Felix Dent himself opened the door of the carriage in which she sat.

"You here?" she cried involuntarily; "I thought you were on your way to 'The Lodge' when I met you."

He did not raise his eyes to hers, and his face was positively ghastly in hue as he stammered out, after handing her from the carriage,—

"I thought you might want help at this end; I know you are not accustomed to come to town by yourself."

Grateful for the consideration he showed for her,

although it was most inconvenient—for notwithstanding Ruth was absolutely free from any suspicion of Felix Dent, she felt that he was far too weak to be trusted in any emergency — she was kinder in her tone as she replied,—

“ You are very good, but I am sorry you came, I do not require any help, really.”

“ You want a cab, I suppose ? ” he faltered, still not looking at her.

“ Yes, I do want a cab.”

“ Very well, wait an instant here and I will secure one.”

In a minute he returned, and offered his arm to Ruth, saying,—

“ Take my arm, you will get less knocked about in the crowd, the station is always awfully full just at this time.”

Exhausted with excitement, and bewildered with the turmoil on all sides, Ruth was glad to accept his assistance, but when she was seated in the four-wheeler, which he procured for her, she encountered another, and still greater surprise. Felix Dent had asked where he should tell the cabman to drive, and

after an instant's consideration, Ruth had replied, "Towards King's Cross." Dent gave the order, but still he stood by the open door, and Ruth had just decided that he was waiting for her to dismiss him, when he faltered out,—

"Miss Forrest, will you do me a kindness?"

"Certainly, if I can," she replied, with slightly raised brows.

"Well, then, will you give me a lift as far as Covent Garden? I have business in King Street, and it's awfully hot for walking."

Much annoyed, Ruth hesitated for a few moments, and then seeing no way of declining his request, peculiar though it was, without arousing his suspicions, she uttered a very cold assent, and thereupon, his face whiter than ever, Dent stepped into the cab, shut the door with hands which trembled visibly, and took his seat opposite her.

The silence was unbroken between them until they reached the market, and then Felix Dent alighted, and muttering his thanks in an almost inarticulate manner, lifted his hat, and disappeared quickly in the crowded streets.

Much puzzled by the singularity of his manner, Ruth was still trying to find some explanation of it when the cab stopped outside the metropolitan station, and the cabman, descending from his seat, opened the door.

“Here you are, miss, this is King’s Cross,” he said roughly.

“But I want to go further,” Ruth remarked quietly.

“Well, the gen’elman didn’t say so, the gen’elman told me King’s Cross,” the fellow replied insolently ; “why don’t you say where you want to go at once, and not make a man get up and down when there’s no need ? It’s no joke when you’ve got the rheumatics, I can tell you. Now, then, where do you want to go ?”

Ruth flushed, rudeness of this sort was quite new to her, and the man’s mention of the “gen’elman” also worried her, for it was evident she had already attracted attention, and her great desire was to avoid it.

“I will get out here,” she said nervously, “what have I to pay you ?”

With an indescribably insolent wink the man laid his finger along the side of his nose.

“ Ah, you want to catch me, do you ? ” he said, with a brutal chuckle, “ it won’t do, my lady. I saw the ‘ gen’elman ’ a-taking of my number ; you want to get me to charge you twice over, and then you’ll go and lay information agin me, as likely as not. Lor’ bless your heart, I’ve been served that trick afore now. I ain’t been a-driving about these streets for twenty-five years not to be up to a few dodges. You ought to be ashamed of yourself, a-trying to get an honest man into trouble.”

Utterly at a loss as to his meaning, Ruth stood with her purse in her hand and her bag at her feet, her heart sinking with dismay to find herself the central object of attention to a group of rough idlers whom the cabman’s raised angry voice had attracted to the spot.

“ What’s the matter, cabby ? ” was the laughing inquiry on all sides.

“ Why this ’ere young person, I ’spose she calls herself a lady, she lets her young man get out on the way an’ pay me my fare, an’ then she goes an’

tries to get me into a trap, an' offers to pay me again, knowing all the while that her spark he took my number right enough. I calls it filthy shabby conduct I does, an' that's all about it."

With which the irate Jehu pulled himself on to his seat again with exaggerated groans, supposed to be caused by the sufferings he endured during the process, and flogging his thin horse savagely, drove off amid the boisterous laughter of the onlookers, leaving Ruth ready to sink into the ground with mortification and alarm.

Not daring to inquire the way, Ruth started off in the direction of Pentonville Hill, and had nearly reached the top, quite breathless and bewildered by her unfamiliar surroundings, before she contrived to free herself from the half-dozen ragged, dirty urchins who had followed her the whole way from the station, almost deafening her, and adding to her confusion and distress a hundred-fold, by the shrill clamour with which they pressed upon her the advisability of employing one of them to carry her bag. At length, harassed to death by the pertinacity of the juvenile roughs, she turned at bay.

“Cannot you leave me alone?” she cried almost fiercely, “I don’t want any of you, I prefer to carry my bag myself.”

“Give us somethink to drink your health in then, miss,” the eldest of her persecutors said in a threatening tone; “if you don’t you won’t get rid of us in a hurry.”

Her eyes flashing with anger, Ruth took a shilling from her purse, and dropped it into the outstretched grimy hand, and the next instant she had the satisfaction of seeing her followers suddenly disperse with whoops and ironical jeers at her expense.

“Oh dear,” thought the weary girl, looking around at the smoke-begrimed houses and the dusty, parched trees in the little front gardens, “if I am to expect this sort of thing as a rule, life in London will be harder even than I anticipated; I thought at least I should be too insignificant to be noticed, but it seems to me that there must be something quite extraordinary about me this afternoon, people stare most horribly, and I daren’t take another cab, that dreadful man has given me quite a sickener of them;

besides, if there is anything so peculiar in my appearance, my father might be able to trace me through the cabman. By the way, why did Felix Dent take that man's number I wonder, could he have suspected anything? Thank Heaven I was prudent enough not to let him know the address. Why, it's nearly half-past five! How thankful I should be for some tea, but I must get on, this feeling of homelessness is awful!"

Ruth was almost fainting with fatigue, when at last, after being misdirected a dozen times, she turned into a desolate, shabby-genteel square, and perceived to her relief that this was, indeed, the longed-for goal.

D—— Square was a very out-of-the-way, dismal place, and as she stood on the dirty doorstep, weary and almost stifled with the closeness of the smoky atmosphere, a horrible sensation of depression, which her active anxiety before had held at bay, began to creep over her; but, exhausted though she was, she wrestled with it bravely.

"I am faint-hearted," she said; "I shall be better after my tea; I have scarcely eaten anything

to-day ; when I have had my tea I shall feel another being."

It was well for her she had so large a stock of resolution to draw upon, for when the blistered shabby door was opened, she drew back involuntarily, so sickeningly close were the scents that assailed her sensitive nostrils, and so dirty and slovenly the wan-looking maid who answered her knock.

"Have you come to look at the lodgings?" the girl asked; "'cos, if so, we let this morning, and thankful I am that we did, I'm pretty nigh run off my feet with answering this door."

"I am sorry for that," Ruth answered gently, struggling against the fresh access of depression caused by the wretched aspect of the close, dark passage. "I thought I should never find the place; I am Miss Martin."

"My word, are you?" the girl exclaimed, opening the door wider, "why, I thought you was to come in a cab; where's your luggage?"

"I will explain about that, presently," Ruth replied, resenting the curiosity that shone in the

girl's eyes. "Let me in, please, I shall be glad to see my rooms and to sit down."

With an insolent stare the servant opened the door on the left of the narrow passage, and ushered Ruth into a small stuffy room with a bay window and closed folding-doors.

"You can sit down," she said, with a covert sneer, "but you'd best not take off your hat until you've seen missis."

Not deigning to reply, Ruth sank into the slippery horse-hair elbow chair, and gazed with knitted brows and turned-down lips round the comfortless ill-kept apartment.

"It's bad enough, certainly," she murmured at length. "I had no idea that London lodgings were anything like this; but, of course, Jane had to take my limited means into consideration. I can't afford to pay for luxurious quarters; it wouldn't be so unendurable if it were not so dreadfully close and musty; I don't believe the window has been opened for days; such weather as this, too."

With a weary sigh Ruth rose once more, and, scarcely able to drag herself across the room, so

foot-sore was she, went to the window, and removing a few rusty pins from a pair of dirty, scanty lace curtains, which had been strained across the window, unbolted and flung the sash up as far as she could, and then seated herself close to it.

It was nearly seven o'clock now, her search for D—— Square having occupied her for more than an hour, and the cool evening breeze blew in at the open casement and fanned the girl's aching brow.

"That's better, much better," she murmured, leaning her head back against the window frame, and closing her tired eyes. "I fancied an hour ago that there was no air stirring in this part of London. Jane was wise, after all, in choosing such unattractive lodgings. My father is not likely to look for me here, and it's only for a short time that I shall have to endure the place."

Two minutes later the door of the room opened, and, stifling a yawn, Ruth pulled herself out of her chair, as a red-faced, vulgar-looking woman entered. Mrs. Burton advanced a step or two, and then stopped short, and, pointing at the window, cried in harsh, strident tones,—

"Who opened that window, letting in all the dust? If it was that slut of a gal, I'll show her who is mistress here!"

"I opened the window," Ruth said quietly, staring at the coarse angry countenance with undisguised dismay.

"Oh, you did, did you?" the woman continued, rudely; "then p'raps you'll shut it up agin afore you go."

"What do you mean?" the girl cried in alarm, for, weary as she was, the idea of turning out again even from this uncomfortable shelter was terrible to her. "My friend came this morning and engaged these apartments for me."

"Oh, I knows all about that," was the insolent rejoinder; "but I've had enough of taking in ladies as comes on foot without any luggage. The person as called this morning said you'd come in a cab and bring your boxes along with you. If I hadn't believed her I shouldn't have taken my card out of the window, I can tell you, without her paying me a week in advance, at least."

"There need be no difficulty about that," Ruth

responded, determined not to lose her temper; "I will pay you a week in advance if you wish it, and my luggage will be here to-morrow, possibly. How much are the rooms?"

The woman eyed her sharply, but her tones were less fierce and more cringing as she replied,—

"Why, didn't your friend mention the sum miss?"

"I think not," Ruth answered; "I cannot remember; but it doesn't matter, you can tell me now."

"Well, you'll want attendance I suppose, miss, cooking, and errands run, and your rooms kept nice and clean?"

"Yes, I shall require all that."

"Well, then, the rooms, without attendance, would be thirty shillings a week, this and the back bedroom through the folding doors; with attendance, boot-cleaning, kitchen-firing, and everything included, it would be two pun two shillings."

Dumbfounded, Ruth looked at the woman, who stood puckering her stained black alpaca apron into folds, calculating in her own mean mind the chances of

further gulling her guileless lodger, who at the first glance she had seen was not the sort of person she was accustomed to receive under her roof.

“Two guineas!” Ruth cried; “but that seems to me a great deal. Cannot you take less than that? My friend knew that I wished cheap lodgings.”

“Very well, then; it’s open to you to go and find them,” Mrs. Burton replied, noticing with a grim smile of satisfaction the girl’s pale face and exhausted, drooping attitude. “You’ll have to pay me five shillings, though, for taking the card out of my window, or I’ll know the reason why; poor people must be protected agin this sort of thing, you understand, miss. I might have let again and again if it hadn’t been for you, and as to the terms being high, well, you’ll find yourself mistaken about that. It strikes me as you don’t know much about the price of London lodgings; but I’ll tell you one thing, respectable people isn’t likely to care to take in a young lady as goes looking about for rooms by herself at this time in the evening. If it hadn’t a been for your friend coming this morning, I tell you, blunt blank, I shouldn’t.”

Faint with weariness, Ruth turned away and, walking to the window, looked out at the long shadows which lay across the street. In less than an hour it would be dusk, and she shuddered at the notion of wandering there homeless as the shades of evening fell. Then again she was by no means sure that the woman's demands were exorbitant, though she keenly suspected it. Any way she knew that she could do no more that night, for even as she stood there she felt her brain grow dizzy.

"I will pay you the two guineas," she said, taking out her purse, "for this week at least. Now please let me have some tea as quickly as possible."

The woman clutched the coins, and then, with a sudden show of humbugging civility, which roused in Ruth even an increased sensation of disgust, she went away, that she might at once set about the preparation of her new lodger's meal, while the small servant showed the tired girl her bedroom, which, in the fading light, was so dark, as well as stuffy, that it was almost impossible to see at all.

When the tea came, however, Ruth was too tired to take any advantage of it. Swallowing with

difficulty one cup of the weak, flavourless liquid, and forcing down her throat a slice of very unappetizing bread-and-butter, she pushed the tray away, and drawing the *uneasy* elbow chair to the open window, sat down and gazed wistfully at the sky, in which she could see dimly, through the canopy of smoke, the rosy tints of the sunset.

“After all,” she said, “perhaps in the end it may be as well that I found a difficulty in getting in here. My fright at the idea of being turned into the streets will certainly dispose me to make the best of things. Then, again, my miseries will not last for long. I must keep that comforting reflection well before my mind; I am young, too, and I dare say in a few days I shall be as strong as I used to be. This woman is certainly vulgar and horrid in her manner, but sweet manners and charming looks are not always to be relied upon, as I know to my cost.”

She sat silent for a time, and then she murmured tenderly,—

“I wonder what my dear love is doing now? He is in a great state of mind, I am sure, because by

this time he must have received my cable. To-morrow he will start, and in about four weeks I may expect to see him. Ah, my darling! if I had not been so miserable, I should not have sent for you, and then I should not have seen you until December, and this is only the second week in August; that thought, at any rate, makes things more bearable."

For another hour Ruth sat there thinking of Jack, and then ringing her bell, ordered her candle, and proceeded to her poor sleeping chamber.

"Comparisons are odious," she murmured, looking disapprovingly at the strips of faded, soiled carpet of various patterns and degrees of shabbiness which covered the floor, and the cracked crockery on the painted washhand-stand; "therefore I am quite determined not to compare my new home with my old, but to be thankful to have a roof over my head, such as it is. However uncomfortable the bed is, too, I defy it to keep me awake to-night; my brain is half asleep already. Well, I hope it will be clearer to-morrow, for one thing is very plain to me, which is, that at this rate six

pounds fifteen shillings, which is all I have in my purse, won't last me until Jack comes to my rescue."

At that very moment Felix Dent let himself into his lodgings with his latch-key, and staggering upstairs, stumbled into his sitting-room, and threw himself with a drunken, ghastly laugh into a chair.

"It's no good," he muttered, in thick, indistinct accents; "I've drunk enough to make me as tipsy as a lord, but I can't get tipsy enough to forget. Well, I've finished the thing now; it's no use crying over spilled milk, and any other fellow would have done as I have, that is, if he were a thorough-going devil, as I am."

The miserable man broke into maudlin tears, and sat there in the darkness crying and cursing himself until a clock in the neighbourhood struck the hour of twelve, and then, still utterly crushed with self-loathing and only half sober, he stumbled to his bed, and throwing himself upon it, was soon in a lethargic sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

AT five o'clock that afternoon, when Lady Forrest entered the drawing-room, she found Herbert Westall pacing rapidly up and down in great suppressed excitement.

"Well, what has happened?" Arabella cried, running to him and shaking his arm in her eagerness.

"Everything exactly as we could have wished," he responded. "I left Dent an hour ago trying to drown his remorse in unlimited drinks. Ruth and he went up to town together, and, as good luck would have it, the station-master noticed them at this end. He spoke to me just now, and said Miss Forrest had a near shave of missing her train, and that the gentleman who was with her had to jump into the luggage van."

"That's all right, then," the little lady replied,

quietly. "Now, I'll go and fetch my dear old husband to have a cup of tea, and then we'll spring the mine. I wish this was the end of it, Bertie. I don't like the part that's coming, I'll own."

To which her cousin replied with a shrug of his shoulders, his eyes glittering ominously.

But the unfortunate, deluded Baronet was not allowed to consume even one cup of tea before the whole house was in an uproar.

The gong having sounded twice, and his daughter not making her appearance, Lady Forrest ran up to the girl's room, and returned almost immediately with a letter in her hand, her eyes gleaming with feverish brilliance,

"Ruth is not there!" she cried; "and here is a letter addressed to you, Richard. What can it mean?"

As white as death, the old man stared blankly at the letter, while, shading his face with his hand to conceal the nervous twitching of his lips, Herbert Westall muttered,—

"I'm afraid I know what it means, sir; prepare yourself for a shock."

Sir Richard looked hopelessly into the callous, cruel face, but he appeared unable to articulate, and Westall continued hoarsely, —

“Miss Forrest went to town this afternoon by the 3.50 train. She had a heavy dressing-bag with her, and Felix Dent took her ticket and went up in the same train.”

With a wailing cry the unhappy old man rose, and stood for an instant clutching at the collar of his shirt, while the veins in his forehead swelled alarmingly, and then with a gasp his muscles appeared to relax, and he fell fainting into his chair again.

“Water, water, Bertie!” Lady Forrest cried, in great agitation, unbuttoning her husband’s collar and loosening his necktie. “I said it would be dangerous to tell him without more preparation. If he should die now, we should have had all this work for nothing.”

“Oh, he won’t die so easily,” the man replied, brutally, flinging the cold water sharply into the face of the unconscious Baronet. “He’s not so fond of the girl as all that comes to. Now, if

you'd run away it would be a very different matter, my dear. I wonder what she says in that letter? Is it safe for him to have it, do you think?"

With a pout of her lips, Lady Forrest continued to bathe her husband's forehead.

"You must think me a greater fool than I am, Bertie," she said, "if I wasn't sure what was in that letter I shouldn't risk it. She could not have worded it better from our point of view. Ah, see," she went on with a sigh of relief, "he's coming to now, thank goodness."

An hour later, leaning on his confidential valet's arm, Sir Richard tottered through the hall and mounted with difficulty into the carriage, the man taking his seat on the box with the driver. At the station the old gentleman got out, and having been closeted for ten minutes or so with the station-master, came on to the platform to await the down-train, which was due in a few minutes.

"Jacobs is the guard on this train as he was on the 3.50 up. He knows Miss Forrest by sight; he may be able to tell you something, sir," the station-master said. "I know no more than that the

young gentleman took the tickets ; but Miss Forrest hadn't time to run to the office herself, you must recollect, and he didn't get into the same carriage with her. Not that that's anything to go by either. I have seen that sort of thing before in cases of—— Ah, here comes the train, if you will step aside here, Sir Richard, I will bring Jacobs to you."

Sir Richard walked even more feebly when, half an hour afterwards, he returned to 'The Lodge'; but his face was grim and determined, and there was no weakness in his voice as he addressed his wife and her cousin, who were anxiously awaiting his coming.

"The case is perfectly clear," he said, harshly ; "the wretched girl has eloped with this man. She was seen by the guard Jacobs to enter a cab with him at Waterloo and drive off."

"And what then, Richard ?" his wife cried, clasping her hands in simulated distress ; "what more have you learnt ? Can the people at the station tell you who the cabman was ?"

"I do not know," the old man answered sternly ; "I have not asked, and I shall not do so. My

daughter has disgraced herself and me ; of her own free will she has left her home ; she has been false to her lover, and false to her mother's memory. I will never see her again ; and if you have any love or respect for me do not mention her name. I wish to forget that I ever had such a child. Now, Belle, give orders for an extra good dinner to-night ; I have telegraphed for Mackintyre—he will join us at half-past eight, and he is a bit of a gourmet.”

Then taking his wife's hand in his trembling fingers, he bent his head and kissed her, continuing, with a quaver in his voice, which despite himself betrayed the soreness of his heart,—

“I won't blame you, my darling, for looking sad, for I know you are too generous not to sincerely regret my unhappy daughter's fault. Many women in your position, however, would see cause for rejoicing and not for sorrow.”

Even the practical, hard-featured lawyer, Mackintyre, was bound to admit to himself that Sir Richard Forrest's young wife behaved very charmingly in the matter of her step-daughter's trans-

gression. Immediately dinner was ended, without waiting to sit over the wine, much to Mackintyre's disgust, Sir Richard rose, and requested the lawyer to follow him at once to his study. But before the reluctant man had crossed the room, Lady Forrest intercepted him.

"For Heaven's sake," she said, earnestly, "don't let Sir Richard do anything rash. Be severe with him, if necessary; represent to him that many girls have acted in the same way, and that in all probability his daughter didn't recognize any great wrong in what she was doing. You won't misunderstand me, I hope, Mr. Mackintyre," she continued, softly, "I should be grieved if you thought badly of me. I am not trying to condone her fault, no one can blame Ruth more truly than I do in my own mind—my heart aches when I think of poor Jack Rathbone—still Ruth is my husband's only child, and his health is so feeble at all times, even though we try to shield him from excitement and trouble, that I fear he might not be able to set right at a future period anything he might do now in the heat of anger."

Full of respect for the disinterested little lady, the lawyer followed his client; nor when he perceived how his expostulations fanned the fire which burnt in Sir Richard's breast into a raging flame, did he suspect the genuineness of her advice.

But the innocent-looking, soft-eyed Arabella knew her husband better than the lawyer knew him, and was perfectly aware that Sir Richard, whose pride was smarting under the humiliating shock he had received, would be further hardened towards his daughter by any remonstrances from his man of business.

In perfect silence the two cousins sat in the drawing-room listening intently. Presently they heard the library-bell ring, and Arabella, running to the door, met the footman who had just answered it.

"What is the matter?" she cried, with flushed cheeks. "Sir Richard is not faint again, is he?"

"No, my lady," the man replied; "Sir Richard wants the cook and Brown to go up to the study for a minute."

Her eyes dancing with excitement and triumph, Lady Forrest returned to her cousin.

"It is written, evidently!" she whispered. "He has sent for the servants to witness his signature."

Herbert Westall made no audible reply, but bending down, pressed his lips to hers; and then, walking to the open window, took from his waist-coat pocket a small, neatly-sealed, white paper packet; opening this, he scattered its contents on to the flower border which surrounded the house.

"What are you doing that for?" Arabella asked, the flush dying suddenly out of her cheeks.

"We have no further need of it," he answered, coolly; "it has done its work splendidly. It is wonderful, isn't it, how much a lively imagination assists one sometimes? That girl would have frightened herself to death before long. This is a different matter, however, and we must be awfully careful; it won't do to be too precipitate. It is positively necessary that the thing should appear to happen perfectly naturally, but this faint and Sir Richard's generally feeble condition ought to make

things all right for us. Buckle on your armour, *ma belle*; we've done with play, now we must begin to work."

With which he took another little paper packet from his pocket, and the woman, clutching his arm, began to shiver nervously.

CHAPTER V.

RUTH's sensations on waking the first morning in her unfamiliar surroundings were anything but cheerful, nor did her spirits rise when, having accomplished her toilette, she entered the dreary, sunless sitting-room.

"Things go contrary," she said, with a wan smile. "I have a north aspect here just when I don't want it. I am afraid I am an example of the perversity of human nature. Now, when I can't have it, I should be thankful for the sun which inconvenienced me so at home from an artistic point of view."

Ringing her bell she gave the sickly little maid, who looked even more weary in the morning than she had the night before, orders for her breakfast; and then, having opened the window, and once more unpinned the curtains, she sat down to await its coming.

“What in the world shall I do with myself?” she thought. “I daren’t go out for walks in the daytime, at least; there are no books here, and it is certain I can’t afford to buy any; I have no letters to write either; Jack is on his way, possibly, at any rate he will be before he could get a letter from me, and there is not another person to whom I dare confess my whereabouts. Decidedly not to Miss Harding, she would believe I was maligning my step-mother to a certainty.”

Ruth knitted her brows thoughtfully, and then, struck with a sudden thought, she murmured more cheerfully,—

“I’ll occupy myself with dusting my rooms; that will be something to do. I couldn’t live in such a dirty place as this, and I haven’t the heart to complain of that poor little girl. This afternoon, I daresay, my cable will come from Jack, and then I shall have something pleasant to think of, at any rate.”

The pale little slavey was considerably astonished when the distinguished, aristocratic-looking young lady in the parlours begged for the loan of a duster,

and coming into the bedroom helped her to make the bed and to tidy up things generally.

Ruth was as long as she possibly could be over her household duties, washing the fly-marked looking glass over the mantel-shelf, and polishing up the glasses of the garish chromo-lithographs which hung upon the walls, and mortally offended her artistic senses. But loiter as she might everything was completed, and the room looked comparatively decent, denuded of its dirty lace curtains and obtrusive white antimacassars, before two o'clock arrived, at which hour she had decided to dine, her landlady having flatly declined to cook anything after six o'clock in the afternoon. Her dinner consisted of a terribly tough steak and a rice-pudding, and when she rose from the table she laughed involuntarily.

"I won't breathe a word against the meat," she murmured with a merry smile, "for if it had been more tender I should have finished my dinner in half the time, but the pudding!—well, Mrs. Burton's strong point is evidently not cooking or house cleaning, or civility. I wonder what she does excel in?"

for, according to dear old Miss Harding, everybody in the world has their one particular merit. I am rather afraid Mrs. Burton's talents lie in the direction of cross-examination; she is certainly inclined to be inquisitive, and that is a very inconvenient taste on her part, so far as I am concerned."

At half-past six Ruth put on her wide-brimmed hat and veil, and sallied forth. No cable had come from Jack; but though she could not bear leaving the house for an instant until she had received his message, she perceived the absolute necessity of procuring some sort of luggage in order to quiet Mrs. Burton's loudly-expressed speculations on the subject.

In the immediate neighbourhood she was able to buy a cheap trunk, and some plain under-linen, and then she began quickly to retrace her steps; but ere she reached her new home she once more turned back towards the shops. It was evident to her that the light tone and fashionable cut of her gown was far too noticeable under her present circumstances; and having observed a ready-made black costume for what appeared to her the ridiculously cheap

price of thirty-one shillings and sixpence, she decided that she would purchase it, since it would become perfectly impossible for her to go out at all if she continued to attract the same amount of attention.

It did not occur to the girl that there was anything complimentary in the frequent glances that were bestowed upon her ; but many a tired clerk, wending his way to his humble lodgings, thought of the tall, elegant maiden, whom he had encountered, who carried her head so proudly, and walked with such an easy grace, and who in her general bearing was so unlike the stooping, listless young women that were usually to be met with at that hour, on their way to their homes after a hard day's work.

No message from Jack awaited Ruth, but though the disappointment was keen, after a minute's consideration she came to the conclusion that in all probability he had delayed sending it because he could not tell her at once by what ship he would sail. The rest of the evening she worked hard at altering the black gown so as to make it a somewhat better fit, and when she had finished she surveyed herself

in her glass with grim satisfaction at what she considered her utterly dowdy appearance ; which satisfaction, however, was slightly damped when the little maid broke out into loud heartfelt praises of her skill, and declared that she had never seen a gown that set off the figure more beautifully in all her born days.

Wearily the days passed away, until on the seventh morning Ruth was forced to admit, with a mournful shake of the head, that it was no use fretting and fuming any longer. Jack had evidently not cabled, and the best thing she could do would be to think of some way in which to occupy herself for the three or four weeks which must elapse before he could arrive, even supposing he started at once on the receipt of her message, which in all probability he had done.

Wracking her brains for some employment, she sat thinking deeply, and then of a sudden she started, and her face brightened as though a ray of sunlight had fallen across it. Why should she not buy some brushes and small canvasses and amuse herself with her painting? she thought. The light

was not good, certainly, but the aspect was right, and it would be better than sitting doing nothing hour after hour, her mind full of sad thoughts and distracting uncertainties.

“I wonder I did not think of it before,” she murmured, cheerfully. “They will be wretched daubs, of course, under these circumstances, but it will be something to do, and it will be one comfort to be able to tell Mrs. Burton that I am busy and cannot talk while I am at work.”

Ruth hurried over her breakfast, and for once running the risk of going out in broad daylight to fetch her materials, by ten o'clock she was seated before a hired easel in the best light she could get, palette and brushes in hand, with her head on one side, gazing thoughtfully at the blank canvas before her.

When the little slavey came to lay the dinner-cloth at two, she uttered an exclamation of astonishment, and Ruth received her flattering expressions of approval with unmitigated satisfaction, for she also experienced quite a warm little gush of pleasure in her four hours' work.

She had always been accustomed to criticize herself rather severely, but she believed that the sketch on which she had been employed was as good in its way as any she had ever done. Miss Harding had taught her on rather a curious system, a system wherein the power of memory in reproducing natural objects and scenes was very specially cultivated. Many a day Ruth's morning's study had been to sit for an hour and carefully watch an effect of light on river and trees, and then returning to the house at once, to transmit her recollections to the canvas.

Sir Richard Forrest, being very conservative in his notions, at first had argued somewhat strongly against this unusual course, but at length he had come to the conclusion that it appeared to suit his daughter's rather singular talent, and that there was a poetical unlaboured quality about her work which was possibly the result of her peculiar style of instruction.

Now, at any rate, the system stood the girl in good stead ; her choice of subjects certainly would be limited, for she could not attempt anything but

what she knew by heart ; but she had but to shut her eyes to see her beloved river, and the green banks, and the trees and plants, under an almost infinite variety of aspects : in the pale and ethereal pink of dawn, or in the rosy glow of sunset ; grey and bleak, with driving clouds and bare black boughs ; radiant with sunlight and a wealth of blossoms, or silvery and peaceful in the placid moonlight.

At tea-time she rose from her easel thoroughly tired, but happier than she could have believed possible.

“There, Lizzie,” she said to the admiring little maid, “I have done a good day’s work, haven’t I?”

“I never see’d anything like it afore, miss!” the girl replied, enthusiastically. “Why, see that water, now ; it looks as if it was moving ; my word, you are clever ! I likes it a deal better than those pictures on the walls, though they has got frames and glasses.”

“I am glad you do, Lizzie,” Ruth responded, with a laugh ; “and, at the risk of appearing conceited,

I'll say I think you show good taste. Now what have you in your hand—anything for me ? ”

“ It's missus's bill,” the girl said, her pale cheek flushing somewhat guiltily. “ You come in at about this time last week, you know, miss.”

“ Quite right, put it on the tray,” Ruth murmured, still hovering round her canvas. “ I'll look at it in a minute or two.”

But when Ruth unfolded the greasy half-sheet of paper, she uttered a cry of dismay ; the bill was for nearly four pounds ! With a shaking hand she emptied the contents of her purse on to the table and counted the coins eagerly ; they amounted to exactly two shillings short of Mrs. Burton's account.

She was still gazing blankly at the ill-written column of items, wherein it appeared that mutton-chops, eggs, steaks, and the poorest, thinnest claret were the most expensive viands that could possibly be consumed, when a peremptory knock came to the door, and Mrs. Burton entered. A momentary glance at the puzzled, worried face of her young lodger and the spread-out coins showed the woman

the position of affairs, and immediately she buckled on her offensive as well as defensive armour to do battle.

“ You don’t find nothing wrong in that, I suppose, Miss Martin ? ” she commenced, indicating the paper with a short, thick forefinger.

“ Well,” Ruth stammered, “ it is much more than I expected. I seem to have had such very plain food.”

“ Ah, but plain food costs money,” Mrs. Burton interrupted, boisterously, “ and I’ll thank you for the amount of my bill at once.”

Ruth pushed three sovereigns towards the suspicious, angry woman, saying quietly, with a quaking heart,—

“ I cannot pay you the rest until to-morrow, at any rate.”

Mrs. Burton secured the gold, and then raising her voice, commenced reproaching and threatening the frightened girl until at last she felt positively dizzy with the misery and humiliation of the scene. At length, however, the virago withdrew, hurling at her scared lodger’s head as a

parting threat the information that unless she paid her in full by ten o'clock the following morning out she should go—she and her traps together.

Poor Ruth! her pleasure was not destined to be long-lived.

“If I had not bought these things,” she murmured, gazing mournfully at her artistic properties, “I should at least have been able to escape such insults as these; but who would have believed that I could have eaten what would have cost nearly two pounds?”

With a very dreary face she commenced her meal, but presently her countenance cleared again.

“After all,” she murmured more brightly, “I don’t think I need regret my extravagance, the things cost very little; I have had a pleasant day instead of a wretched one, and the crisis has been only a trifle hastened; it was bound to come in time, and perhaps it is just as well that Mrs. Burton should understand plainly at once that I cannot continue to pay at this rate.”

Putting on a thick black lace veil, which completely obscured her features, Ruth unlocked her

dressing-bag and took from it the leather case containing her valuables.

The jewellery in her possession, though good of its kind, was by no means extensive, consisting only of a few simple girlish ornaments, her mother's jewels remaining under her father's care until his daughter should marry or become of age, and the entire contents of the leathern case were a handsome watch, with her monogram in diamonds and rubies, her father's present on her seventeenth birthday, a marquise turquoise ring, set in diamonds, a string of small pearls with a pendant, and two fanciful diamond brooches, presents from Jack. On the third finger of her left hand she wore a diamond half-hoop ring, but this she determined not to part with except under the direst necessity, for Jack had placed that ring on her finger on the happiest evening of her life.

Ruth's ideas with regard to the value of her belongings were of the vaguest possible description, in fact she knew little or nothing of the cost of things generally. She had been accustomed to dress well, for her mother had brought her up to be fastidious

and somewhat extravagant, even, in this particular, but her father's allowance had been a liberal one, and as her seclusion from society did not necessitate her having a very large variety of gowns, she had always been able to settle her milliner's and dressmaker's bills without any difficulty, and have plenty of pocket-money besides.

After a few moments' reflection, however, she came to the conclusion that her watch was probably of more worth than anything else in her stock, and therefore it was the watch which she took with a sigh from the leather case, and then, carefully re-locking her bag, left the house with her proud head bent, and with a general air of stealthy guiltiness.

Knowing that this dreaded hour was inevitable, she had before made up her mind in which direction to bend her steps when it arrived, but although there was no indecision in her mind, her pace grew slower and slower as she neared her destination: and when at length she came in sight of the handsome-looking shop which appeared like an ordinary silversmith's, until on gazing upwards the significant

golden balls could be descried dangling high over head, she came to a sudden stand, her heart sinking in her breast and a sense of burning shame upon her.

“I am foolish,” she muttered, “but I will humour myself so far, and no farther; I will walk past the shop to the top of the hill, but coming back I will go straight in. It must be done, there is no getting out of it.”

As a rule procrastination certainly does not brace up the flagging energies, but in this particular case putting off the evil hour for a few minutes stood Ruth in good stead. Before she had reached the top of the hill, even, her common sense had come to her rescue. She had not given any particular thought to the subject before, never imagining it to be within the bounds of possibility that she should be reduced to such straits herself, but she had read in novels of pawnbrokers, and naturally had become imbued with the general tone adopted in fiction with regard to these establishments.

In works of fiction it appeared that to pay a visit to a pawnbroker's was a terrible degradation, and

she had accepted this view of the case as the real one, and had suffered acutely in consequence, at the horrible necessity which was forced upon her; but now, in thinking over the difficulties of the impecunious heroes and heroines that she had read of, she could not remember that it was considered by any means disgraceful to borrow money from a private friend, and surely, she argued, it should not be less lowering to the pride to make a perfectly commercial transaction of the matter, and to leave good security for the loan, than to ask a favour from a friend who could scarcely refuse to grant it.

“What absurd impressions one gets,” she murmured at length. “If I never do anything more shameful than this I need not reproach myself. My poverty is not my own fault; it would be different if it were. False shame is as bad as false pride. To be in debt I should consider a disgrace, but so far as I can see this is no more than an investment.”

But, after all, though we may see very clearly the common sense of an argument, our instincts are seldom overcome by the perception. It was instinct with Ruth to shrink nervously from proclaiming her

poverty to a perfect stranger ; and though she would not permit herself to loiter on the threshold for an instant when she reached the shop the second time, she felt terribly embarrassed as she confronted the tall, grey-haired, spectacled man who stood behind the well-polished counter. Finding, however, that he betrayed no vestige either of surprise or curiosity when she explained her errand and displayed her watch, she was fast recovering her composure and congratulating herself that the matter was so easily arranged, when she was considerably taken aback by the shop-keeper's inquiring how much she wished to borrow upon the article.

The necessity for stating a certain sum had not occurred to Ruth. She fancied the man would lend her what the thing was worth ; and being naturally anxious to get as big a loan as possible, her utter ignorance on the subject confused and worried her greatly.

Hesitating painfully, she raised her eyes, and saw, with some uneasiness, that the pawnbroker was regarding her with an expression of unmistakable distrust.

"I want ten pounds," she faltered, feeling convinced the watch must have cost far more than that.

The man raised his eyebrows and compressed his lips tightly, but after an instant's consideration he said, curtly,—

"Very well, I will lend you that."

Taking a little heap of coins from his cash-box, the pawnbroker produced a pen and ink and a pasteboard card, and then inquired Ruth's name and address.

This, again, she had not expected, and once more she hesitated before replying. It was plain to her that she could not give either her own name or that by which she was known to Mrs. Burton, for fear her father might hear of the pawning of the watch, her novel-reading having taught her that missing people were constantly discovered by means of these establishments. To fix upon a fictitious name and address, however, in an instant was by no means easy, and the pawnbroker had a grim frown on his face when at length the embarrassed girl informed him, in rather tremulous tones, that her

name was Helen Townsend, and that she lived at a certain number in the Strand.

The name was a purely imaginary one; but though Ruth's acquaintance with the titles of London streets was very limited, she knew that the Strand was not such a fashionable thoroughfare as either Regent Street, Bond Street, or Piccadilly, and so she thought it would serve her purpose better; but, as ill-luck would have it, the number in the Strand that she had fixed upon was that of a well-known pawnbroker; and the frown upon the face of her interlocutor deepened as with a quick glance of suspicion at the thickly-veiled countenance before him, he took up the watch and examined the jewelled monogram closely.

"Is this your own watch?" he asked, sharply.

"Yes," Ruth replied, not understanding at the moment the drift of the question.

"Then Helen Townsend is not your real name."

"Not my real name?" Ruth repeated, blankly, utterly at a loss what to say.

With an angry gesture the man pushed the watch across the counter towards her, and then tearing

up the pasteboard card, swept the money back into his cash-box and re-locked it with a violent snap.

Ruth watched his proceedings with beating heart and shortened breath. What could she do? To tell a direct lie was impossible to her, and yet it was absolutely necessary to have money before the next morning's breakfast hour arrived. She had given the false name in the first instance without any qualms of conscience, recognizing no more harm in doing so than in the assumption of a *nom de théâtre* or *nom de plume*, but she could not bring herself to maintain what she had imagined was a perfectly innocent and allowable deception.

Clasping her hands nervously together, she looked appealingly at the angry man.

"Does it matter?" she faltered at length. "I am sure I have read that people don't always give their real names when they pawn things."

"They used not to," the man replied, harshly; "but it's against the law to do otherwise now. It's the only protection we have against thieves."

Ruth winced, and the pawnbroker, mistaking her

natural mortification for an evidence of guilt, continued roughly,—

“Take this away, please; I can’t do business with a person like you. Take it away, and think yourself lucky that I don’t call a policeman’s attention to you as a suspicious character.”

Trembling in every limb, cold with indignation and terror, Ruth seized her property, ran out of the shop, and with heaving breast walked swiftly along the crowded thoroughfare until she had put a mile between herself and her insulter. Then she slackened her speed, and turning into a quiet side street, pushed up her veil and passed her handkerchief over her heated brow and quivering lips.

It was half-past eight, and soon the shops would close. She must get some money somehow. It was possible, if she tried again, the next man might not be so particular and suspicious; at any rate, she would know better how to proceed on the second occasion. She had made a foolish mistake in forgetting the initials which formed the monogram, and she had seen at once that the Strand address also was not to be used with impunity.

It went against the grain terribly with Ruth to do what she now knew was illegal ; but she could not recognize any moral wrong in suppressing her real name, since the watch was really her property and, evidently, was fully worth what she asked for it. Pulling herself together, she pursued her walk along the crowded, bustling street, and in five minutes halted at another shop over which the three great balls were conspicuously displayed.

This time she asked eight pounds for the watch, thinking, perhaps, the smaller sum might tempt the mean-looking man behind the counter to forego some of his precautions ; but, as it happened, this was the very worst thing she could have done, for her demand being so far short of the worth of the watch, she aroused the fellow's suspicions at once. Immediately the cross-examination commenced, and once more the girl felt it impossible to verify her statement.

Ruth's cheeks turned deadly pale under her veil, and she was seized with a sensation of positive faintness at the brutal torrent of words with which she was assailed. This man was of a decidedly

lower type than the former one, and being more disappointed at missing what promised to be a good bargain, he made no attempt to conceal his indignation or his contempt.

“Go out of my shop, quick! sharp!” he cried, angrily; “you may tramp all over London, and you won’t find any respectable tradesman that will do business with you. If you tell a lie, why the devil don’t you stick to it? I daren’t take the thing. How do I know that you are not a lady’s-maid that has bolted from her place with everything she can lay her hands on? You must be a pretty fool, you must, going and telling a lie, and wasting people’s time, and then backing out of it.”

With blank despair at her heart, shuddering with disgust, Ruth went out into the street again. As she did so a neighbouring clock struck nine.

“What can I do?” she thought, with quivering lips. “If I cannot get rid of this, the other things also will be useless to me, and if there is no way for me to raise money I shall starve. That woman will turn me out to-morrow morning, and then what will become of me? I must try again; I will go to

a poor shop this time ; that dreadful man said no respectable tradesman would do business with me. Well, if he is a specimen of a respectable tradesman, I would just as soon have to do with one that is not."

This time the anxious girl did not return into the main thoroughfare, but pursued her way through obscure and squalid byways, shuddering again and again with nervous dread as her course was impeded by drunken altercations, or by a group of begrimed and ghastly-looking children, whose wan, pale cheeks and hungry eyes wrung her heart with pity.

She had not far to go, however, before she found the object of her search ; but in this case it was no handsome, tempting-looking silversmith's, with polished plate-glass windows, before which she halted. The shop front was small and insignificant, and the window, dimly lighted by a couple of unshaded gas jets, was dirty and forbidding-looking ; one half of it being filled with a large assortment of second-hand boots and umbrellas, and the other with a heterogeneous collection of discoloured old silver and cracked china, with here and there a

watch, or a diamond ring or pin. Outside was a board, on which was heaped second-hand clothing and faded carpets, and standing against it were one or two outrageously bad oil-paintings.

Ruth was still hesitating as to whether she could make up her mind to enter this unpromising-looking establishment, when a board sticking out from the side entrance decided her. On this was printed in large golden letters: "A. Moss, Pawnbroker and Silversmith. Liberal terms. Purchases easily arranged."

"I will try it," she murmured, setting her teeth resolutely. "This place ought to suit me; there is nothing respectable-looking about it, at any rate; and, perhaps, if he arranges purchases 'easily,' Mr. Moss won't be too inquisitive."

Stooping her tall head, and shrinking involuntarily, to avoid touching any of the very questionable-looking garments which festooned the entrance, Ruth entered quickly, but before she reached the counter she stopped abruptly, her heart sinking like a lump of lead as she gazed at the owner of the shop—a red-haired little Jew, with so repulsive and

brutal a countenance that the poor girl felt a positive sensation of dread as she encountered the ferrety, cruel eyes.

She was more than half inclined to retreat, but the shrinking figure and thickly-veiled face evidently interested the Jew strongly, for the ferrety eyes began to gleam with a still more evil glitter, as, bending towards her, he hissed in an eager whisper,—

“ Well, my dear, and what can I do for you ? ”

“ I want to pawn this watch,” Ruth faltered, quelling, in desperation, the terror which the covetous wicked face inspired in her.

The man’s eyes opened wide, and his dirty claw-like fingers, which were loaded with diamonds, clenched involuntarily as Ruth displayed the beautiful little watch.

“ Oh, you want to borrow money, do you, my dear ? ” he continued, still in the same hissing whisper ; “ then you ought to have gone down the passage at the side of the shop, you’d have seen a door which lets you into a sort of little cupboard, that’s where them as wants to pawn things goes.

We does other business in the shop, as a rule ; but, however, it doesn't matter, I like to accommodate a lady when I can. Now, let me have a look at that there watch."

Reluctantly Ruth advanced her hand, and the fellow, clutching eagerly at the watch, examined it rapidly, and placed it on a shelf behind him. Then, leaning over the counter, he placed the tips of his dirty fingers together, and leered up into the girl's disgusted face.

" You want to pawn this little watch, do you, my dear ? " he said, with a repulsive grin.

" I do," she answered, shortly.

" Well, I'll do business with you *if* I can," he continued, with an ominous emphasis on the " if." " But if I was you I should sell. I'm a fool to advise you to do so, I know, for I should get more out of the transaction if you pawned it, but I like to help a pretty gal if I can, and I can see you are fresh at this sort of thing. You sell it, my dear ; it's a better plan, sometimes ; you see, you gets more for the article, and it ain't necessary for me to ask no inconvenient questions."

The blood began to throb in Ruth's brain, but overcoming the aversion which the man's insolence inspired sufficiently to speak, after a minute's consideration she bent her head and faltered,—

“I should prefer to sell. What will you pay for the watch?”

“Well, my dear, what do you want?” the man asked, with a grin, which displayed a formidable row of yellow teeth.

“I want ten pounds,” Ruth gasped.

With a shrill whistle of simulated astonishment the Jew took the watch from the shelf and pushed it towards her, still, however, keeping his grimy fingers upon it.

“Take it away, my dear,” he cried, hoarsely, “take it away; you are much too expensive for me; and my name is known all over London too. There's not another chap in the trade as does business so easy as me. Perhaps you don't happen to know that in most places they ask you a whole heap of questions before they will buy. Well, sometimes questions is easy to answer, sometimes they ain't. Pretty girls has secrets sometimes as they

don't want to confide to every one, don't you see ? ”

Her heart throbbing painfully, Ruth forced herself to look into the horrible impudent face.

“ What will you pay me for it ? ” she said. “ I am tired—I don't wish to go further to-night.”

“ And it wouldn't be much good if you did,” the man whispered, with a wink of indescribable brutality. “ Well, let me see ; I don't want to be mean with a real lady like you, but I must think of my wife and children too. I'll give you six pounds for the watch—not a tanner more.”

One faint expostulation Ruth ventured upon, on which, placing the watch out of the girl's reach, the Jew emerged from behind the counter, and, laying his hand upon her arm, proceeded to argue the matter at close quarters with facetious familiarity ; the result being that Ruth, shrinking in dismay from his nearer approach, accepted his offer at once, and when the last golden coin had been slowly deposited in her hand, went quickly out of the shop, relief at her escape from the horrible man and dismay at the

miserable result of her negotiations being about equally balanced in her anxious mind.

But Mr. Moss's satisfaction was perfectly unmixed. Hardly had the girl left the shop before the ruffian called to his wife,—

“Look here, Martha, here's a good stroke of business, and no mistake; this here couldn't have cost a penny less than fifty pounds; I wonder where she prigged it? I shall just unset these stones; I can sell them for twenty pounds to-morrow, easy. The watch I shall keep back a bit, but in a year's time I shall just put a new back on it and send it out of the country, and there you are, my dear!”

Ruth settled with her landlady before retiring to rest, and found, to her great relief, that her proposal to do her marketing for herself in future was received in a far more pleasant spirit than she had anticipated. She did not guess the truth, however, which was, that had she been unable to pay the balance of her debt at all, Mrs. Burton would not have put her threat of turning her out of the house into execution.

In fact, at the risk of losing a little money, the

landlady would not have lost sight of Ruth for the world; she having a very shrewd suspicion that the day might come when her mysterious young lodger would prove a veritable mine of wealth to her. With this idea in her mind she made no difficulty whatever about Ruth's reducing her expenses, and even consented to lower the rent of the rooms five shillings a week.

Ruth went to her bed with a thankful heart; after the scares she had experienced, it was quite a blessed relief to feel Mrs. Burton not quite so unconscionable a creature as she had appeared; and again, that with economy she ought to be able to support herself comfortably until Jack arrived; after that she had no fears, nor did it occur to her for a moment that there would be anything derogatory in accepting help from him. Her rest would have been considerably disturbed, however, could she have seen Mrs. Burton that same evening eagerly examining the agony column of the *Times* in search of some advertisement describing a tall, handsome young lady, under twenty years of age, with the initials R. F., who had left her home August 10th, 1889.

CHAPTER VI.

By the end of the fourth week Ruth's situation began to assume a very serious aspect. Her pearls and the two diamond brooches had been disposed of at ruinous rates to the rascally little Jew; but notwithstanding her scrupulous frugality in regard to food, she had now only a few shillings in her possession, not enough to carry her through the next week.

She did not despair, however; she had still her two rings, and in another fortnight, putting it at the extremest limit, Jack must be with her. But she resolved that she would spend no more money on canvases or paints, and that she must occupy herself as best she might until her lover came to rescue her from her terribly forlorn and desolate existence.

The fortnight passed; the turquoise ring had

gone. Ruth was again penniless; now only the beloved engagement-ring remained, and still no Jack came to cheer her drooping spirits and bring comfort to her aching heart.

By this time Ruth was reduced to a pitiable condition of nervousness and agitation. Day after day she sat by her window gazing intently down the street, and listening eagerly for the footsteps which her heart yearned to hear; but the shadows began to fall early now, and when the little maid brought the lamp and Ruth was forced to lower the blind to prevent the passers-by looking into the room, she felt that she shut out hope with the last lingering remnants of the daylight, and the hours of evening were so utterly wretched to her that she was glad to creep to her bed in the vain hope of forgetting her troubles in sleep.

“If I could only speak to some one it would not be so awful,” she muttered one night, tossing uneasily on her comfortless couch. “This lonely life is too terrible! If I could only tell my trouble and get some comfort! What can have happened to Jack? Oh, my love! why don’t you come? Can

you not hear me crying to you? Great Heaven, if he should be dead! But no, no! I will not believe it! God is merciful. He is trying us now, but He will not part us forever!"

The next morning, when Mrs. Burton came in as usual to receive her week's money, Ruth asked, with a falter in her voice, whether by chance she had seen or heard any account of an accident having happened to an Australian steamer. The woman looked up at the anxious questioner, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"Why do you ask?" she demanded, sharply.

The intentness of the gaze alarmed Ruth.

"I fancied I heard some people talking about a ship that was overdue," she stammered.

Mrs. Burton could give her no information that evening, but she promised to consult a nephew of hers who was an office-boy to an underwriter, and who would know all about the ships. Two days later she reappeared.

"Tom's just come in, Miss Martin," she said, "and he says that there is a ship from Melbourne as is overdue—the *Stirling Castle*. It's five days

behind time, but they ain't frightened yet. Ships is often two and three weeks late at this time of year."

Ruth made no reply, but when the woman left the room she rose, and pressing her hands upon her breast, as though to crush the horrible, stifling dread that weighed upon her heart, she began pacing her narrow domain feverishly.

"I won't be frightened either," she moaned; "I won't. He will come to me—I am sure he will! God will listen to my prayers. He would not have let me struggle on so long to kill me now. But what shall I do?" she cried aloud, stopping short, as a fresh dread assailed her. "She says the ships are often two and three weeks late. I have only a shilling now, besides Jack's ring."

She pressed her lips to the ring, while the tears coursed quickly down her wan cheeks.

"Oh, my ring, my dear ring!" she sobbed. "You must go, but when I have spent that money what shall I do? I don't know how to work—I am useless, utterly useless. Heaven help me! If he doesn't come soon I must either go mad or starve!"

When Ruth turned away from Abraham Moss's shop the following evening, having left, it seemed to her, a part of her heart with Jack's engagement-ring, she looked from right to left with a sensation of complete, blank misery.

The man had perceived at once that his customer was more than usually agitated, and, being accustomed to make the most of every opportunity, and imagining her nervousness arose from a far from innocent cause, he had absolutely refused to give more than two pounds for what was worth at least sixty. Her very lips were white as, walking mechanically forward, Ruth muttered to herself,—

“Next Wednesday I shall have to pay Mrs. Burton thirty-five shillings. I have just five shillings to live upon until then, and after next Wednesday?”

Quickening her pace, she broke into a run. There was a veritable scare upon her, and it seemed to her as if she must try by flight to escape from the crushing trouble that lay upon her shoulders. Entirely heedless of the passers-by, oblivious of the attention she excited, or of the way she was going,

she ran on and on, until she was out of breath, and then, still utterly dazed, she came to a stand and looked around her.

She was in a bustling, crowded thoroughfare, which was quite unfamiliar to her, and opposite was a little group of loungers who were looking in at a well-lighted shop-window. Aimlessly she walked forward and mingled with the group, and then she uttered an involuntary exclamation which caused several persons to peer very curiously into the thickly-veiled face.

The shop was that of a second-rate picture-dealer, and in the window were displayed a number of small landscapes, with wide and elaborate frames, which, in spite of the bewildered condition of her brain, Ruth perceived at a glance were altogether inferior to her own work. For five minutes she stood before the shop, and then she walked away drawing a deep breath, as though a great weight had been lifted from her.

“Thank Heaven!” she murmured; “my steps must have been guided to this place. Surely my work is better than that. It never occurred to me

that people could sell such things as those. I will take my sketches to that man to-morrow. If I can only earn enough to keep body and soul together for a few weeks I shall be satisfied."

Ruth did not sleep that night, and she had scarcely patience to wait for the dusk the following evening before she sallied out with four small canvases strapped up neatly in brown paper.

When she arrived at her destination, once more she saw a small crowd of people around the window, but she did not loiter herself. Threading her way through those that stood in the doorway, she entered, and found herself in a shop which appeared crowded from floor to ceiling with framed pictures; many being reproductions of well-known paintings, but the majority original and of a very inferior description.

There was no one in the shop when Ruth entered, but she was not sorry for this, as it gave her time to compose herself and brace her energies for what was coming. In a minute or two, however, she heard voices, and then a door at the back opened, and a white-haired old man, of a most reverend aspect,

came through, followed by a pale-faced, fragile-looking girl of about twenty.

At the sight of the old man Ruth's heart gave a bound of pleasure. She had prepared herself for the worst—picture-dealers being scarcely more popular in works of fiction than pawnbrokers—but when her anxious glance fell upon Mr. Pratt her fears were quieted at once. There was something eminently respectable, not to say gentlemanly, in the stooping, rather thin figure, while the silvery, thick, white hair, cleanly-shaven, fresh-complexioned face, small mouth, and limpid, grey eyes, were calculated to inspire at once the warmest confidence.

Again, the old dealer's gentle air of consideration for the delicate-looking girl who accompanied him appealed to Ruth very forcibly, and she could not restrain a feeling, which amounted almost to indignation, as she noticed how coldly the young woman received his civility, replying to his genial good-night in the very shortest possible manner.

Ruth was still blaming the girl and wondering that she should have been so ungracious, for she had a sensitive, interesting face, when Mr. Pratt

approached her, and bowing courteously, in a rich, soft voice asked her business with him.

Ruth had expected some difficulty in explaining her wishes, but no sooner had she faltered out, "I have brought a few oil sketches with me," than Mr. Pratt took her little parcel from her, and motioning towards the inner door, said with a pleasant smile,—

"Ah, you have brought me some of your work? Well, will you step into my inner office? I am always glad to encourage rising talent if I can, though, unfortunately, this is not the best season of the year for selling."

Returning his smile gratefully, for there was something in the soft voice which was very soothing to the lonely girl, Ruth followed her conductor into a small room at the back of the shop, that had a writing-table in the centre, upon which were lying two or three carved wooden frames, of a very elaborate and delicate design.

"These are pretty things, are they not?" the old man said, lifting one carefully and showing it to Ruth.

"They are beautiful," the girl replied, warmly; "I have never seen more exquisite carving!"

Mr. Pratt nodded gently.

"You are right," he said, with a sigh. "The person who carved these is very clever, but, I grieve to say, she is wanting in energy. She ought to get on well; these are the work of that young lady you saw in the shop just now. She was vexed with me to-night, but I spoke for her good. If she worked harder she would be better off, and it seems to me wrong a person should make so little use of the talent that has been granted to her. When one has had to work one's way in the world, as I have, it's very grievous to see clever people wasting their lives."

"But now," he continued, dismissing the sadness in his voice with a shake of his silvery head, and taking out his knife to cut the string of Ruth's parcel, "now let us see what you have here."

With a fluttering, hopeful heart, Ruth assisted in unfolding the parcel, and then, quivering with suppressed excitement, offered what she thought the best of the sketches for Mr. Pratt's inspection.

He broke into quite a musical little exclamation of surprise on looking at it.

“Why, my dear young lady, this is charming!” he cried, “quite charming! That little peep of the river is capital—it’s very slight, of course, but it’s very pretty, really, very, very pretty! I’m surprised,” he continued, beaming at the gratified girl. “It’s not good business, I know, but I’ll own I’m surprised. Now let us look at the others. Ah, very good! very, very good, upon my word! And what price do you put upon these, now?”

“Oh, I have no idea at all what they are worth,” Ruth cried, impulsively. “I would far rather you named a sum, really.”

The old man shook his head with a smile, and patted her arm gently.

“My dear,” he said, “that’s not at all the right manner for a lady who desires to be considered a woman of business. I can’t be buyer and seller too, don’t you see? You know what you have received before, I suppose?”

“But I have never sold anything before,” Ruth

responded quickly, revelling in the feeling that for once she could speak freely.

“Dear me !” her companion replied, wrinkling his brow thoughtfully ; “that’s awkward, too, for how are you to know that I am doing you justice ?”

“Oh, I should have no fear of that at all !” the girl exclaimed, brightly. “Please tell me what you think the sketches are worth. I am anxious to sell them, and to set to work upon others. I am determined you shall not have to reproach me with want of industry, at any rate.”

Mr. Pratt smiled again, but once more he shook his head doubtfully.

“I am sorry you know so little of these matters,” he murmured, gently. “I should really grieve that you should think I was trying to take advantage of your ignorance. It seems to me the man who first instils distrust of human kind into a frank, guileless nature like yours, has a heavy responsibility upon him. And yet, on the other hand, my dear young lady, enthusiastic art students are apt to set a very excessive value on their first attempts.”

Ruth coloured, and raised her hand with a deprecating gesture, and the old man continued softly,—

“Don’t misunderstand me, please. I am only speaking as a tradesman of the marketable value of these little pictures. They are very clever; I would not deceive you for the world, nor would I underpay you. I should consider myself guilty of a positive act of dishonour if I imposed on one who trusted so freely in me; but at present your work has very little intrinsic value. Wisely or not, the British public pays for the signature on the canvas nowadays, not for the quality of the painting. Well, you must not grumble at that; have patience: some day your signature also will represent so much coin of the realm, or I’m much mistaken.”

The picture dealer paused here, and looking gratefully up into his face, Ruth said, with a slight tremble in her voice,—

“I cannot tell you how kind I think it of you to treat me with so much consideration, but indeed my self-conceit is not sensitive. You need not be afraid of wounding me. Pay me what you think

is reasonable. I have no doubt I shall accept it gladly."

Once more Mr. Pratt took up the sketches and examined them carefully, and then putting them down he turned towards Ruth, and rumpling his silver hair with his white, delicate hand, said,—

"Well, my dear young lady, I will give you for the four pictures thirty shillings; or, taking one separately, I will pay you ten shillings for it."

Sick with disappointment, Ruth retreated a step, and then clasping her hands tightly together, she bit her quivering lips and struggled fiercely with an hysterical inclination to burst into tears. Her hopes had been raised so high, and now they had been dashed so cruelly! It was almost more than her already overstrained nerves could stand. It was true Mr. Pratt had tried to soften the blow, but so niggardly a sum as he mentioned had never entered the girl's calculations for an instant.

The four little pictures had occupied her for the greater part of three weeks. At that rate of payment she could not possibly live, however hard she

worked. Mr. Pratt waited a few seconds, and then he said rather sadly,—

“I am afraid, after all, I have hurt your feelings. I warned you that I might do so.”

“It is not that,” Ruth faltered, trying vainly to steady her voice; “it is not a question of my feelings; it is a question of earning a living. I was nearly three weeks over those pictures.”

“I dare say you were,” the old man replied, with a sigh, “and it is a very hard thing that young talent should be so badly paid. I am not rich enough, however, to buy pictures for the purpose of encouraging art—I wish I were. I can only afford to buy to make a profit, and my profit on those sketches would be very small if I paid you what I offer. However, you mustn’t lose heart. I am not the only picture-dealer in London; don’t give me an answer to-night. Take time to think; my offer stands good for a week. To-morrow, go round to some of the other shops, and see if you can dispose of your work to greater advantage. By-the-bye,” he continued, kindly, “would you like me to give you a few addresses of likely people? I should be

very glad to help you if I could, and some of these men might see their way to offering you more—at any rate, you can but try.”

“I shall be most grateful to you if you will give me any assistance,” Ruth replied, brokenly. “I am quite ashamed to have appeared so wanting in self-control; but you must please blame my ignorance, not me. I had no idea people were ever paid such sums as that for artistic work.”

“Ah, no, I suppose not,” Mr. Pratt responded, “and I should be very sorry to have to wring your heart with some of the tales I have heard. But things may be better than you think with regard to these pictures of yours. I cannot afford more, but several of these men I am sending you to, are in a larger way of business than I am. Now this Mr. Melsom, of S—— Street, City, is the head of a most substantial firm, and is, moreover, a thoroughly good, honest man. You can rely upon him implicitly; I could tell you stories of that man’s generosity and benevolence which would charm you. I should go to Melsom first if I were you. Come, sit down a minute. I’ll write a few

words to him; it might give you a better chance."

Somewhat cheered, but still with a painfully fluttering heart, Ruth seated herself and watched the kindly-looking old man while he wrote a rapid note.

"There," he said, when he had blotted it, handing it to Ruth, "what do you think of that?"

Ruth read,—

"DEAR MELSOM,—

"The bearer of this is a young artist who appears to me to show marked talent. I have seen the pictures she is going to submit to you, and consider them decidedly clever. If you can meet her views I think it may prove mutually advantageous. Unfortunately, just now my stock is inconveniently large. With kindest regards, yours very faithfully,

JOSEPH PRATT."

"1,000. 500.

"It seems to me that it will do beautifully," Ruth murmured; "but ought I to understand the figures at the end?"

"Oh, no, that's nothing," Mr. Pratt answered, smiling pleasantly; "that's merely a business form which is understood in the trade. As you see, I have put that number on all these addresses; it represents one of our little business secrets—a very innocent one, however. And now, my dear, I won't keep you any longer; it's getting a little late, and this is not a very nice neighbourhood for a young lady to be out in alone in the evening. Good-bye to you; I am quite grieved to have disappointed you so! That's one of the hardest parts of my business. I cannot bear to damp any one's ardour, and you artists always have such sensitive natures. Good-night; I hope you will have luck to-morrow. Let me know how you get on, for indeed I am much interested in your success."

Lingering a minute or two longer to obtain directions as to how to proceed on the morrow, Ruth bade farewell very gratefully to the old man, and walking rapidly in the direction of her home, resolutely trod under foot the depression which still weighed upon her.

"I am faint-hearted," she murmured, "very

faint-hearted. I could scarcely hope to succeed at once. I ought to be very well satisfied. This is such a poor neighbourhood, but Mr. Melsom lives in the City, and the City is an awfully rich place, I know. If he likes the things no doubt he will pay better. At any rate, I am lucky in meeting with such a kind man as Mr. Pratt; not many would have taken all that trouble."

CHAPTER VII.

RUTH was in the City before ten o'clock the next morning, having understood from Mr. Pratt that if she wanted to do business there she was bound to go in the daytime, and the earlier the better. The morning was bright, and she was full of hope when she reached the office of Mr. Melsom, which was not what she had expected it to be, there being no shop front or any show of pictures that she could see; but when she came down the dusty stairs again a quarter of an hour later, her eyes were troubled, and there were lines of anxiety in her forehead.

Mr. Melsom had been as suave and pleasant in manner as she had anticipated from Mr. Pratt's encomiums, but he had told her at once he could not take her pictures into consideration at all—that they were not in his line, though very

charming; and that he thought she would do well to accept a small offer for them if she could get it, for, although there was undoubted talent about them, they were not suitable for reproduction, etc., etc.

Six times poor Ruth unfolded her parcel that morning, her fingers shaking so at last it was with difficulty she re-tied the frayed string. As a rule she was treated with civility, but the answer was the same in substance in all cases. The pictures were pretty, but they were not suitable to the persons to whom they were offered. In several of the offices she was kept waiting an hour before she could see the principal, and when, having visited the last address on Mr. Pratt's list, completely worn out with fatigue and disappointment, she turned her steps homewards, she heard one of the City clocks strike the hour of five. She had been seven hours tramping about the City, for she dared not venture on the expense of riding from place to place, and all that time she had eaten and drank nothing.

She managed to control herself, however, until she reached her lodgings, but once in the shelter of

her own room she broke down altogether, and flinging herself on her bed, made no effort to restrain the tempest of her hopeless disappointment. By-and-bye she sobbed herself to sleep, and it was quite dusk when she again opened her smarting eyelids.

With a start she arose, and ordering some tea and dry toast, commenced to remove the traces of her dusty morning's expedition from her dress, and to bathe her pale, tear-stained face.

At eight o'clock she entered Mr. Pratt's shop for the second time, encountering on the threshold the girl whom she had seen the night before. They had to make way for each other, for the doorway was narrow; and as Ruth drew back with instinctive courtesy to allow the other to pass, the wan girl looked up into the veiled face, and a quick gleam of sympathy came into her large, wistful eyes.

Ruth understood the expression immediately, and although her inborn pride was somewhat wounded by the compassion in the stranger's glance, the sorrowful interest which appeared in the delicate,

gentle countenance was soothing to her. The stranger had no need to be told. It was out of her own bitter experience that this young girl read Ruth's case so plainly. The quick glance from the paper parcel under her arm up to her face said as plainly as though the wood carver had spoken the words, "Ah, you have been unsuccessful then ; you have brought your work here again. You have been wearing your heart out all day ; I know what that is."

They wished each other "Good-evening," and then the sad-faced girl went out with a sigh into the crowded street, drawing her shabby mantle closely over her chest, and shivering slightly.

Walking into the shop, Ruth found Mr. Pratt examining with keen interest another and still more elaborate carved frame. He looked up quickly as he heard the shop door close, and Ruth's sinking heart revived a little as she saw the kindly, questioning expression in the soft grey eyes.

"Well," he said, gently, "and what luck have you had ?"

"I have had no success at all," was the faltering

reply. "I have brought the things back to you. I will take what you offer since no one else will give me anything for them."

"Why, wouldn't Melsom make you an offer for them, then?" Mr. Pratt asked, gently.

"No," Ruth answered, shortly, for she could scarcely trust herself even to think of her miserable morning. "There was only one among the six who suggested buying them, and he proposed that I should take five shillings each for them."

Mr. Pratt drew down the corners of his lips and nodded his white head with a murmur of sympathy, and then taking the parcel once more from the poor girl's listless fingers, he unfastened it, and setting the little landscapes up again at a convenient distance, thrust his delicate hands deeply into his pockets, and jingling his loose money softly, stood silently regarding them with his head on one side, while Ruth, chilled to the heart with disappointment and vague, terrible fears for the future, sat with her aching head resting upon her hand.

Five minutes passed in complete silence, Mr. Pratt glancing from time to time keenly at the

despondent attitude of his visitor, then, sighing heavily, he advanced to the girl's side and laid his hand gently on her arm.

"I cannot bear to see you so depressed," he said, softly. "Is it so serious, then, as all that?"

"It is very serious," Ruth answered; "so serious that I daren't think of what is before me."

Once more there was silence for a minute, and then Mr. Pratt began rumpling his white hair with almost a fierce gesture.

"Well," he said, "I am a fool, I believe, and I think my people are about right when they say I am not fit for this business; but the fact is, I cannot stand this sort of thing, and that's the truth. Now look here, I will pay you another five shillings each for these pictures, and by doing so I shall not make a penny of profit on them. However, I can't help that; I should feel every farthing of profit I made out of you a weight on my conscience. Now do you think you can manage on that?"

Ruth rose to her feet impulsively.

"It will be very difficult," she said, in a less

despairing tone ; “ but I can but try. I could work harder than I have done, and I daresay I should get quicker in time, but I am paying over thirty shillings a week for my lodgings.”

The old man raised his eyebrows.

“ What, in this neighbourhood ? ”

“ In D—— Square, Islington.”

“ Then you are paying more than twice as much as you ought for any lodging in D—— Square,” he said. “ Make your landlady take off half—and look here, I am going to propose something else to you. Now, you mustn't think I am either a fool or a philanthropist, because I neither want to lose your respect nor to lay you under an obligation. I believe in your talent, as I have said before, and your ill-luck with all these other men this morning has not lowered you in my opinion—in fact, their want of appreciation of your work has roused a sort of bulldog spirit of obstinacy in me. Now, as I tell you, if I pay you twelve-and-sixpence each for these little pictures I shall not make any profit out of them for perhaps a year or two ; but if you become at all popular, and I think you may, in the future they

will be worth more. Therefore, if you will just sign a little paper which I will draw out for you, agreeing to work for no one else, I will pay you fifteen shillings each now, taking the risk of making my money further on."

Ruth's breath was completely taken away, and for the moment she could not speak. That this man should pay her more instead of less when he found the low estimation in which her work was held, appeared to her almost Quixotic in its generosity; and again, the sum that he offered to her now did seem to make life possible, for if Mrs. Burton could not be induced to see reason, she now felt a certainty of getting cheaper lodgings without any difficulty. She did not wish to move, however, if she could possibly help it, as Jack would come to her at that address, and she shrank nervously from charging Mrs. Burton with any message to her beloved.

"Well," said Mr. Pratt, at length, with a smile, "and what do you think of my proposal? Will you accept it?"

"I accept it thankfully," Ruth cried, with much

emotion; "and I hope the day will come when I may be able to prove to you how truly grateful I am."

"Very well, then, that is understood," Mr. Pratt went on, cheerfully. "Now," putting his hand in his pocket and taking out a handful of mixed gold and silver, "now I have to pay you three pounds for these pictures, and in a minute I will ask you to follow me into the inner office and sign the agreement."

It seemed that Mr. Pratt had no difficulty in making out the agreement, for in almost less than five minutes he called Ruth to him, and she found to her surprise he had already had time to cover the greater part of a sheet of foolscap paper with close, lawyer-like writing.

"Now," he said, "do you want to read it? It's to the effect that you work for me and for no one else, unless I give you a written release from our engagement."

"I understand that," Ruth answered, readily; "and I shall sign the agreement most gladly; only I think I ought to let you know this: in all prob-

ability I shall not continue to work at my painting as a means of livelihood for more than a few weeks."

Mr. Pratt raised his head sharply.

"Indeed!" he cried, a shade of annoyance crossing his face.

"However, I can't be certain of that," she went on, quickly; "and meanwhile I shall do as much as I possibly can, you may be sure."

"Ah, well, don't overdo it," the old man said, stretching out his hand and shaking hers warmly when she had affixed her signature. "I should be quite unhappy if I fancied you looked upon me as a nigger-driver. There is a golden mean between overworking yourself and indolence. Now good-night to you; I hope you will be looking better the next time we meet. It grieves me to see young people in trouble. Yours are fragile shoulders to support a burden of that sort. But don't lose heart. Often what we consider troubles are in reality merciful dispensations of Providence. The longer a man lives the more easily he sees how little he can judge for himself what is best."

Much touched, Ruth grasped the thin white fingers.

"You are right," she murmured; "I was nearly in despair this morning, but now I cannot regret that unhappy experience, since without it I should not have been able to recognize to the full your great generosity."

The following morning Ruth rose at six, and ere her half-past eight o'clock breakfast she had made good progress with another small landscape. Before she resumed work, however, she summoned Mrs. Burton, and with a beating heart and flushed cheek, but in a quiet, determined tone, acquainted the landlady with the fact that unless she could reduce the rent to one-half she must immediately give a week's notice.

For a minute or two the woman pretended to hesitate. Ruth, however, saw through this ruse at once, and she was by no means disposed to respond at all gratefully when Mrs. Burton declared, with her eyes swimming in hypocritical tears, that though she should lose seriously by such an arrangement, she had not the heart to refuse Miss Martin anything,

and that it would make her wretched to think a young lady who was such a favourite in the house should leave, to go, perhaps, where there would be nobody to look after her if she were ill, or to say a kind word to her if she were in trouble.

Ruth expressed her acknowledgment somewhat coldly, but she was nevertheless greatly relieved, while Mrs. Burton, descending the stairs heavily, murmured to herself,—

“Well, I needn’t grumble; seventeen - and - sixpence is more than I’ve ever got before for them rooms, and she’s no trouble. I’d have taken seven - and - sixpence sooner than I’d have lost her, that I would!”

CHAPTER VIII.

RUTH commenced her dealings with Mr. Pratt in the first week in October, and for a month she worked on with feverish intensity, rising before six each day that she might be ready to sit down to her easel directly the cold morning light was strong enough to enable her to see the somewhat minute work upon which she was engaged. Throughout the day she laboured incessantly, eating her poor meals as quickly as possible, and when evening came she was so utterly weary, and sickened with the close smell of the paints in the small stuffy room, that she was glad to go to her bed and close her smarting, tired eyes.

But though the severe work told seriously upon the girl, who had never been used to steady application of any kind, it was well for her that she

had so little time to think. It was now the first week in November, and the London fogs were beginning to assert themselves in a manner terribly inconvenient to all the votaries of art. Ruth had left her home in August, but still Jack did not come, nor had he sent any message to explain his continued absence.

Sunday was the day that the poor girl dreaded more than any other. She had been brought up by her mother to observe the Sabbath somewhat strictly as a day of rest, but when she found that with all her exertions she could scarcely earn sufficient to provide herself with even the plainest food and pay her lodgings, she thought there could be no harm in relieving the strain of the rest of the week in working for a few hours on Sunday ; for Mr. Pratt, though most kindly and gentle in his manner, was exceedingly particular that her work should be of a uniform degree of finish, and he continually returned for further touches landscapes which appeared to her almost laboriously worked-up already.

It happened, however, that a picture which he

had sent back on the Saturday night for this purpose was returned to him on the Monday evening having undergone a considerable alteration, and so grave an expression came into his face as he took the canvas from Ruth's hands, that she exclaimed involuntarily,—

“Is it not right now? I don't think I can do any more to it; I have worked ten hours at it since you saw it.”

The old man shook his head seriously.

“You don't work on Sunday, I hope?” he said, fixing her with his mild eyes.

“Yes, I do,” Ruth answered; “I find it terribly difficult to live as it is; besides, an unoccupied day would be a misery to me.”

Mr. Pratt shook his head again, and laying the picture down, placed his hand upon her arm.

“You must not do that,” he said; “I should feel a terrible responsibility upon me if I encouraged you—nay, if I did not remonstrate seriously with you. I may be old-fashioned in my notions, but take my word for it, young lady, you will not succeed any better in the world by doing a de-

liberate wrong. The Sabbath was ordered as a day of rest, that we might have leisure to think of other things besides money-making. I cannot allow any one connected with me to break this law. Give me your word that you will not continue your present course ; believe me, no blessing will rest upon such work."

"I cannot see the harm that I do," Ruth murmured ; "there is nothing in any way lowering in painting."

"Perhaps not in itself," Mr. Pratt continued, softly ; "but everything that is wrong is lowering. Come, give me your promise ; I must insist upon it, really ; I can trust you, I am sure you would not break your word, and I feel it is my absolute duty to put pressure upon you in this matter."

Most reluctantly Ruth gave the required promise, and then the old man shook hands warmly with her, and added a fervent "God bless you, my dear, you will thank me for this one day," to his cordial farewell.

Ruth respected Mr. Pratt more than ever after this, though she could not agree with his view of

the subject. She knew, however, that her mother would have sided with him entirely, and her loyalty to her dead mother forced the conclusion upon her that there must be something wanting in herself, since she did not recognize the wrong which was so palpable to those whom she could not doubt were her own superiors.

It never occurred to her to break her word to Mr. Pratt; she would have suffered a martyrdom sooner than have been false to her promise, but the agony of those idle Sundays weakened her strength terribly, and cast a black shadow over the entire week. She dreaded the approach of the day, and on Monday morning she arose from her sleepless couch with her heart still quivering with the recollection of it. She went to church morning and evening, as she had done all along, but she had still a weary waste of hours in which to sit and think, until, clutching her hot head in her hands, she would rock herself to and fro and pray aloud that her senses might be spared to her.

Regularly each Sunday night she went to bed in despair, having made up her mind that Jack

was dead. She had no doubts of him; he would have come to her if he had been alive. He must have died before her cable arrived, for the *Stirling Castle* had come to port safely three weeks late, and for twenty-four hours after receiving that information she had trembled so sorely with excitement that she had given up work, not daring to trust her shaking hand. But that day passed, and the next, and the next, and stern necessity forced the unhappy girl to take up her brushes once more.

But as the effect of the Sunday gradually wore off, under the influence of steady hard labour, Ruth's courage revived to some extent, and ere the day came round again she had arrived at the conclusion that until after Christmas, at any rate, she would not give up hope altogether.

Except in a condition of utter nervous prostration, such a calamity as Jack's death seemed to the young vigorous nature almost inconceivable. It had been his original intention to return at Christmas; it was possible he was wandering somewhere in the wilds, and had never received her cable. In her more hopeful moments all sorts of things

were possible to the naturally sanguine girl ; everything, in fact, except that Jack had ceased to care for her, her faith in him being as absolute as her love for him. Again, although her heart ached at his silence, she comforted herself with the reflection it was more than probable he had written a score of times, and that her step-mother had intercepted the letters, and then her thoughts would revert to Jane Hunter.

At first the woman's non-appearance was a great mystery to Ruth, but after mature consideration she had formed the opinion that the lady's-maid had made up her mind it would be better for her to remain upon the spot to watch the mistress whom she evidently suspected so keenly ; and Ruth derived some consolation where her father was concerned from this conclusion, for she felt that should Jane Hunter suspect any foul play in his case, that she would be sure to let her know, somehow.

Ruth, therefore, decided that Jane had mollified Lady Forrest sufficiently to induce her to re-engage her, and that she had not dared either to write or call lest the girl's hiding-place should be discovered

by that means. Ruth little recked, however, that Lady Forrest knew her whereabouts perfectly well, nor that she gloated over Jane Hunter's description of the miserable quarters which her step-daughter occupied, until that grim woman, who had not the same satisfaction in the girl's discomfort, would turn obstinately silent and refuse to indulge the other's malice any further; saying angrily, when Lady Forrest twitted her with inconsistency, that she had had no particular design in selecting Mrs. Burton's apartments for Ruth, that it had been a matter of profound indifference to her how the girl was housed, and therefore she had taken the first she had looked at.

By dint of untiring energy Ruth contrived, as a rule, to finish two small oil paintings a week for Mr. Pratt, which she took on the Wednesday and Saturday evenings, when it was too dark to do anything further. Out of this thirty shillings she had to pay Mrs. Burton seventeen-and-sixpence, which left her exactly twelve-and-sixpence for food, firing, and artistic materials; and she often thought, with a sad smile, that perhaps she ought not to

complain of the unwholesome atmosphere of her small room, since, had her appetite continued normal, she certainly could not have satisfied it. As it was she had a difficulty in swallowing even the dry toast and cup of tea which represented her breakfast and supper, and the very tiniest portion of meat at her mid-day meal, was almost more than she could manage.

Under these severely cramped circumstances she grew thin and pale-faced, but she would not admit to Mr. Pratt, who showed a most fatherly interest in her altered aspect, that there was anything the matter, feeling that, according to others, he was already paying her more than she had any right to expect.

But though she refused his sympathy, from the fear that she might seem to appeal to the charity of one who had already done so much for her, she felt in terrible need of consolation, and her heart became so sore that at length she actually began to find some comfort in what at first had been a little trying to her.

It happened that on Wednesdays she invariably

met the young carver in wood, who took her week's work to Mr. Pratt that evening, and although the girls exchanged but the briefest possible salutations,—for, for some reason Ruth could not understand, Mr. Pratt was obviously averse to their talking with each other—there was something in the wistful, almost tender compassion that shone in the other's sad eyes which warmed the desolate girl's aching heart. This young work-girl looked at Ruth with the eyes of a friend, and when one is utterly forlorn, even a dumb friendship is worth something, and therefore Ruth had come to long for Wednesday, for on that one evening in the week she seemed for a few minutes to break through the icy barrier which hemmed her in on all sides.

On Wednesday, November 15th, a heavy, suffocating fog hung over London; but Ruth had been compelled to work as best she might, and her eyes tingled and smarted with the strain. By four o'clock she could not see to put another stroke, but the picture was finished, and stretching her arms wearily above her head, she rang the bell for the little Lizzie.

"Give that to Mrs. Burton," she said, putting the amount of her bill into the girl's hand, "and do not bring me my tea until I call for it. I am going out presently."

"Please, Miss Martin, there ain't no tea," Lizzie replied, "and there's nothing but a crust of bread."

"Well, that doesn't matter, Lizzie; I'll bring something in with me."

The little maid went away, and packing her picture up with a doleful smile, Ruth continued,—

"I thought there couldn't be any more tea after that dreadful weak stuff this morning. Well, thank goodness, the picture is finished! It would be a horrible experience to be positively without food. Ah, dear, how tired I am! I'll go and lie down for an hour. I don't wish to be at Mr. Pratt's before six. If I am, I shall not see my friend, and I seem to want her more than usual to-night. I wonder whether she knows what it is to be hungry? I am afraid so; but, according to Mr. Pratt, her poverty is her own fault, that is the extraordinary thing about her."

Five o'clock was striking when Ruth awakened with a start. Raising herself noiselessly on her elbow, she rubbed her eyes, and then she became aware that some one was entering her sitting-room, for through the crack of the folding-door she could see the light of a lamp. She was just wondering what was Mrs. Burton's business there, when she heard her landlady's voice, evidently in conversation with some person whom she did not know. She listened idly, half asleep for a moment, and then, of a sudden, she sat bolt upright on her bed, and a look of eager, alarmed attention came into her haggard face.

"Then you have no idea who she really is?" Mrs. Burton's companion asked.

"Well, no, I have not," Mrs. Burton replied; "but she ain't Miss Martin, that's certain. I looked at her clothes when they come home from the wash that first week. She ain't wore 'em since; she's took to much commoner that she bought after she come. Well, there was 'R. F.' embroidered on her things, and the lace was splendid on 'em; and there's 'R. F.' on the tops of the

bottles in her dressing-bag—she left it open one day.”

“Where is she now?” the other woman went on, while the frightened listener cowered in the darkness.

“Well, that’s what I don’t know, but I’m trying to find out. It’s awful vexing that she should have gone before her time this afternoon, ’cos I had got a plan.”

“What was that?”

“Why, my nephew Tom, he was going to follow her to-night, and he can’t get here till half-past five. She never started afore that, however, till to-night. I want to know where she goes on Wednesdays and Saturdays.”

“What for?”

“Oh, only for curiosity; it ain’t no particular consequence to me, because, of course, so long as she’s here I can hand her over to any of her friends without any difficulty.”

“How much did the advertisement cost?”

“Ten shillings, and not dear either, I don’t

think, 'cos they've put it plain, haven't they? Look here!"

Ruth heard a rustling of newspaper, and then, in answer to a request from her companion, Mrs. Burton read aloud in a harsh voice,—

"Any one requiring information concerning a young lady, tall and dark, with large hazel eyes, straight black brows, with the initials 'R. F.' on her clothes and dressing-bag, who left her home on the 10th August last, may receive it by communicating with Mrs. Burton, 17, D—— Square, Islington. The greatest secrecy promised."

"That'll fetch them, I should think," the stranger said, admiringly. "How many days has that been in?"

"Only to-day," Mrs. Burton responded, "and when your knock come to the door my heart regularly jumped into my mouth. I shan't leave this house for a minute for the next three days, you may stake your life on it; and I shall sit up to-night until twelve o'clock. I don't know where the girl comes from, and if so be as her people live in the country, or p'raps in Scotland or

Ireland, they couldn't be here till late. Well, let's go down now, and have a cup of tea; I wish she'd come in, I shall feel anxious every time she's out of my sight."

Ruth heard the ponderous footsteps cross the adjoining room and go out into the passage, but she did not dare to stir until the closing of a door in the basement told her that Mrs. Burton and her companion were safely shut into the little subterranean parlour which was immediately below her sitting-room.

Then, trembling with fear, she softly arose, and stood for a moment with her hands pressed tightly over her wildly beating heart.

"I must go," she muttered; "I must go at once. At any moment they may come. Heaven help me! If my step-mother gets me into her clutches again, my doom is sealed! And yet where can I go? Oh, I wonder whether there is another creature in this world so friendless as I am! Everybody's hand seems turned against me."

CHAPTER IX.

FIVE minutes later Ruth stole gently out of the house, leaving the door ajar behind her. Under her long black mantle she carried a parcel containing some linen, her hairbrush and comb, her palette, and as many of her paints and artistic materials as she could lay her hands upon in the dark, for she dared not light the lamp, and every step she took in the room over the one in which Mrs. Burton was sitting she knew was fraught with the utmost danger. Her bag she left behind her: she had already disposed of the silver fittings, and in itself it was inconveniently weighty.

Besides the parcel she had the small landscape, which, fortunately for her, she had finished that afternoon; but the purse in her pocket was absolutely empty, and as she turned out into the thick

fog, through which the gas lamps flickered dimly, she shuddered at the prospect before her.

Although she had now lived in London for upwards of three months, Ruth was still profoundly ignorant as to its geography. The streets in the immediate neighbourhood of D—— Square she knew tolerably well; but she decided at once that it would not be safe for her to seek other quarters within a mile or two, at any rate, of her present locality.

Stopping for an instant, she looked irresolutely about her, blinded with the fog, and altogether bewildered with the misery of her situation; and then a sudden idea occurred to her, and with a sigh of relief she folded her mantle round her, so as to conceal the parcels she carried, and bending her head, walked rapidly towards Mr. Pratt's shop. She had not gone a dozen yards, however, before she stopped again, and clung to the railings near her in a sudden access of terror.

It happened that close to Mrs. Burton's house there was a street lamp, and hearing a sound of rapid footsteps behind her, Ruth turned her head

nervously, and saw dimly, through the thick fog, he blurred figure of a man, who, on reaching the lamp, hesitated for an instant, as though he were straining his eyes to read the number on the door, then tore up the steps, and made the whole street reverberate with the energy of his knock.

Before the door could be answered Ruth had turned the corner, and, with clenched teeth, was flying at the top of her speed through the deserted streets.

“I was only just in time!” she panted. “Thank Heaven the fog is so thick! If it were not for the fog they must have caught me. Oh, what will become of me if that girl should have gone from Mr. Pratt’s before I can get there? I know of no one else who could give me a word of advice.”

But Ruth could not keep up her run for more than a few minutes; the thickness of the atmosphere made breathing difficult under ordinary circumstances, and her strength was much reduced, through insufficient food and anxiety.

When, at length, completely exhausted and panting hard, she entered Mr. Pratt’s shop, she turned

suddenly giddy, and was forced to lean up against the glass door for an instant to save herself from falling. In the back part of the shop Mr. Pratt stood examining with his usual care one of the carved frames, but no sign could she see of the friendly and sympathetic pale face on which she had set her hopes.

Struggling fiercely against the faintness which was creeping over her, Ruth staggered forward, and cried with impulsive incoherence, while her whole figure shook with the intensity of her excitement and fear.

"How long has she gone? Please tell me, I may be in time to catch her even now."

Mr. Pratt raised his eyebrows in astonishment.

"I don't understand you," he said; "are you ill?"

"No, no!" Ruth gasped, "I am not ill, but I want to speak with the young girl who carves those frames. Pray tell me quickly which way she has gone."

Mr. Pratt shook his head gravely.

"You alarm me," he responded, gently; "I am

afraid you are ill, really. I know nothing of the young lady you inquire for, except that she left here about a quarter of an hour since."

"But, where does she live, and what is her name?" Ruth demanded, feverishly.

"Her name is Kate Bartram, but I do not know where she lives," Mr. Pratt responded. "I never ask unnecessary questions; as you are aware I do not know your exact address. But, come now, let me see your work, I am a little busy this evening, I had no idea that you and my wood-carver were acquainted."

Mechanically Ruth handed the picture to him, and then, completely dazed, she stood trying to collect her senses and think what she should do. It was six o'clock, but the misery of her homeless condition was increased a hundred fold by the fog, which each moment grew denser, and by a cold sleet which had begun to fall during the last few minutes.

It appeared to Ruth at that moment that her cup was full, and that nothing worse could happen to her than to be almost literally lost in London on

that inclement November evening, with only a few shillings which she was to receive for the picture in her pocket, and without a friend to whom she could apply; for the idea of asking Mr. Pratt's assistance was particularly repugnant to her. She respected him most sincerely; she had absolute faith in his integrity, but to apply to any man for help in her present situation would have been terribly difficult, and more especially a man who would certainly have expected to be told the cause of her miserable position.

But although she was well nigh distracted already, she speedily recognized she had by no means reached the bottom of the abyss down which she appeared to be gradually but surely slipping.

Mr. Pratt having with tedious slowness untied her parcel, took the picture to the brilliant gas jet which was fitted with a reflector, and by which he examined all works of art submitted to him. With compressed lips and slightly wrinkled brow, he studied the subject attentively, and then with a shake of the head, he said in gently disapproving

tones, that fell upon the poor girl's ears like a knell, and sent the blood in a wild surge to her throbbing brain,—

“Ah! dear, dear, dear, I am afraid you are getting a little careless; this work is by no means so good as that you brought to me at first. The foliage of these trees, for example, is anything but satisfactory, and the water is decidedly inferior in life and movement to what you have done before.”

Scarcely able to articulate, so awful was the fear that weighed upon her, Ruth faltered out,—

“The weather has been so dark, you must remember, Mr. Pratt, and the picture is meant to be slight in character; it would spoil it, I think, if the trees were more highly finished.”

Mr. Pratt smiled faintly, but there was nothing mirthful in his smile, neither was there any indecision in his tone as he continued firmly,—

“We don't quite agree on the subject of finish, you know; when you have made your name, my dear, you can adopt as sketchy a style as you please; but an unknown painter is bound to finish, or his work won't sell. Your excuse about the

weather is certainly a reasonable one ; it must have been absolutely impossible for you to do any good work to-day ; let us hope, however, it will be better to-morrow. These fogs are very hard on you artists, and I dare say it is difficult for you to recognize that no doubt they are wisely ordained."

Ruth did not reply ; for the moment it seemed to her as if the power of speech had forsaken her, but when she saw Mr. Pratt begin carefully to wrap up the picture again, her agony became so intense that she stepped forward quickly, and clutching his arm with her trembling fingers, gasped out,—

"Why are you doing it up again?"

"To save you trouble," Mr. Pratt replied, looking in pained surprise at the blanched haggard face.

"You must re-paint those trees altogether before I can take it into consideration even ; and the whole thing is unpleasantly cold in tone and crude in colour. I am afraid you have a couple of days' work on that picture before it will be worth anything, and——"

Almost fiercely Ruth interrupted him.

“I can do no more to it,” she cried, desperately; “I have already finished it more highly than I have any of the others; it is not fair, Mr. Pratt, it is not, indeed, to ask me to do any more.” And then, breaking down suddenly, she turned away and continued in an agitated voice,—“Forgive me,—pray forgive me. I did not mean to be rude, but I am so cruelly disappointed.”

“But why should you be disappointed?” Mr. Pratt asked, slightly offended; “I am really afraid you must be unwell, your manner is altogether unreasonable. As you know, I have been compelled on several occasions to return your pictures for alterations and improvements.”

Ruth did not speak, but she began to shiver with dread. When, however, Mr. Pratt put the parcel into her hand, she broke the silence once more, and looking up into his face, said, with a catch in her breath, and a piteous assumption of calmness,—

“Mr. Pratt, I am going to ask you to do me a favour.”

He bowed and smiled pleasantly.

“Anything I can do I shall be very glad,” he

responded, kindly, "though you have been a little harsh in your tone to me."

"But you must forget that," she replied, with a painful little laugh, "the fog has tried my temper; as you say, it is hard on us artists, and therefore you are bound to make excuses for us. Say that we are friends again."

"Why, yes, without doubt," the old man responded, readily. "I should be sorry indeed to be hard on any one; if I were not willing to make allowances for others, how could I hope for indulgence myself?"

"Of course," Ruth said, her white lips twitching nervously; "I knew you would not bear malice. Now, Mr. Pratt, this is the favour I have to ask you: I will do my best to make this picture better than any of the others instead of worse; I believe I can do so—I am sure I can do so, but, but—I want you to trust me a little, and pay me for it now."

Mr. Pratt gave a little start, and shook his white head very gravely.

"My dear," he said, drawing in his breath with an

audible sound of reproof, "you pain me very much indeed; I am sorry to refuse any request of yours, but what you ask is quite impossible, and I am grieved that you should have lowered yourself in my estimation."

"If I have done so, I also am sorry," Ruth went on despairingly, "but I cannot help it. Mr. Pratt, pay me for that picture now, surely you can trust me as far as that. I would not ask you if I could help it, but indeed I am in want of money to-night."

Once more the old man shook his head.

"I cannot do what you ask," he said, firmly, but sorrowfully; "it would be altogether against my principles. I never lend money, young lady, and I never either borrow or owe it. All my life I have been true to my idea of what is right in this respect, and years ago, when I was young and poor, I often went hungry to my bed, because I would not incur a debt that I might be prevented discharging, for which of us can answer for the morrow?"

"Now, you must not consider me harsh," he continued, avoiding the poor girl's wildly-staring eyes.

“Every one in this world must walk in the path which seems to him to be the right one, and to me this appears the only honest way of living. I keep no one waiting one minute for their earnings, but I consider that I do myself an injustice by advancing money. If I had not been firm in this particular I should in all probability have been ruined, for yours is by no means an unusual application. I grieve that you should think me unkind in refusing your request, my dear young lady; but of one thing I am quite certain, which is, that borrowed money never brings a blessing. Some day you will thank me for having checked in you what has often proved moral ruin. The first time a man or woman borrows money he or she loses so much self-respect, and who can afford to lose even one grain of that?”

How Ruth reached the open air she never knew, but when she became once more conscious of her actions she found herself leaning up against the closed shutters of an unoccupied shop some fifty yards from Mr. Pratt's establishment; her umbrella hung on her arm, and instinctively she clutched her parcels; but the rain and snow were descending

heavily, and soaked slowly into her thin cloth cloak, and still she did not stir.

“What is the use?” she moaned, glaring into the fog with distended eyes; “I have no money—no one will take me in without money, even if I knew where to go. Oh, God! have mercy on me—kill me now! I am tired of life! Jack is dead—kill me now, and let me go to him!”

A minute longer she stood there, swaying giddily on her feet, and then, with a soft cry, she fell, and lay upon the wet stones, with the rain pouring down upon her, perfectly insensible, unobserved by the few passers-by, who, blinded by the fog and sleet, pushed on under their umbrellas with bent heads.

CHAPTER X.

KATE BARTRAM had walked nearly a mile in the direction of her home, when she suddenly turned, and with a sharp exclamation of annoyance, began rapidly retracing her steps.

“How foolish I am!” she murmured to herself. “Now I must go back, and poor father will have to wait ever so long for his tea. I must do it, though; it’s no good grumbling. I am afraid Mr. Pratt’s getting tired of my work; anyway, the chances are, if I carved those roses without asking him first, he would say they weren’t in his style. But I wish I had thought of it before. It is so cold, and my boots are beginning to let in the water badly. Shall I be able to afford a new pair this side of Christmas? I might, if father pulled round and could get some work. Ah dear, life is hard to some of

us ! I wonder how the young artist is ? This has been a bad day for her, poor thing. How I should like to know more of her. Can she be an orphan, and have lost all her money ? She has not always been poor, I am certain. Why, even in that cheap black mantle she carries herself like a princess, and her eyes are so brave, too ! ”

Here Kate Bartram came to an abrupt stop. Through the thick fog, a little further on, the lights of Mr. Pratt’s shop could be dimly discerned ; but just where she stood it was impossible to see more than a yard on either side.

“ What was that noise ? ” she muttered. “ It sounded like a groan. Has some one slipped down in the road, I wonder ? ”

In another instant she again heard the long moaning sigh, and this time she distinguished that it came from the left and not from the roadway. Hastily putting down her dilapidated umbrella, Kate Bartram peered anxiously into the darkness which surrounded her, and then, with a stifled cry of alarm, she crossed the wide pavement swiftly, and fell on her knees, entirely regardless of the wet

stones, by the side of the prostrate figure of a woman.

Placing her arms round the waist of the fainting girl, Kate lifted her until her head rested against her own knee, and then she uttered another and a sharper cry of distress, for in an instant she recognized the young artist with whom her thoughts had been occupied so lately.

Looking around in an eager search for assistance, Kate muttered to herself,—

“What shall I do? There seems to be no one about this evening; I cannot carry her, neither can I leave her lying here while I call Mr. Pratt.”

Another and a deeper sigh interrupted her here, and then the heavy eyelids slowly opened, and bending still closer over her, the wood-carver met Ruth’s forlorn, bewildered gaze.

For an instant the two girls looked speechlessly into each other’s faces, and then an expression of heartfelt gratitude came into Ruth’s straining eyes.

“It is you, then?” she panted; “you have come to me? I was so wretched; I almost doubted God, and now He has sent you to save me. I will never

despair again," she continued, feverishly, "never, never! I thought I had no friend, but now you have come, I am safe."

Terribly alarmed, Kate Bartram assisted the trembling girl to rise, but when she proposed that they should go together to Mr. Pratt's house, that Ruth might dry her wet garments, and sit down until she was more recovered, the girl begged so piteously to be spared the humiliation of encountering the old man in her miserable draggled condition, that the other did not continue to urge it.

"But can you walk?" she said, supporting Ruth tenderly. "You will catch your death of cold if you stand quietly here."

"I can walk quite well," Ruth answered, excitedly. "I want to walk—I want to get away from here. Don't you understand?" she continued, shaking Kate's arm in her eagerness. "Help me to get away—show me some place where I can hide!"

Completely bewildered, and half afraid that her companion was delirious with fever, for her eyes glittered strangely, Kate Bartram drew her arm through hers, and commenced pacing slowly up and

down the pavement in the hope that the steady movement might quiet the excitement under which Ruth laboured sufficiently to enable her to leave her for an instant while she ran in and made the absolutely necessary inquiry of Mr. Pratt. Her relief was great, therefore, when, in a minute or two, she felt the hand that leaned upon her arm so heavily grow steadier, and looking up into her companion's face, saw that the excited expression had given place to a wistful pathos, which, while it caused her a bitter heartache, relieved her fears for Ruth's senses.

Hesitating no longer, therefore, Kate begged Ruth to wait for her, and then running quickly into the shop, considerably astonished Mr. Pratt by the energy of her question. In less than two minutes she rejoined Ruth, and once more arm-in-arm, Kate carrying the parcels, which were soiled and stained with the mud in which they had lain, the two girls stepped out through the fog and rain, and ere the long walk came to an end, Ruth had told her companion, in disjointed sentences, all that she felt she could confide to the ear of a stranger.

By putting two and two together, however, and recollecting Ruth's words in the first moments of her return to consciousness, Kate Bartram gathered sufficient of her story to understand she had a reason for keeping her whereabouts a secret, and also that she had fled precipitately from her home in order to escape from some one of whom she stood in fear.

But as the feverish excitement faded out of Ruth's brain, she became more and more uneasy at the situation in which she found herself. Why should she, an utter stranger, throw the responsibility of her own troubles on to the shoulders of this young girl? She remembered her own reckless words now with dismay, and when Kate happened to mention her father, Ruth stopped abruptly.

"Have you a father?" she cried; "I fancied you were like me, alone in the world."

"No, I have a father, I am thankful to say," Kate replied.

"And does he live with you?" Ruth asked.

"Yes, of course he does."

"Oh, then, what shall I do?" she cried, in great

distress. "I was going to ask you to let me sit in your room to-night; somehow I had made up my mind you were alone."

"So you shall!" Kate responded, in some surprise; "father will not interfere with you—we have two rooms; you shall have a cup of hot tea first with us, and then you shall go to my bed; that is, if you will excuse a very poor one."

But the idea of inconveniencing a strange man was to poor Ruth quite unendurable. There was something about the wan-looking young wood-carver which inspired implicit confidence in her mind, but it was evident to her Kate Bartram was not by any means cultured; in fact, that she belonged to the working-classes. This, however, Ruth, who was something of a radical by nature, did not consider any bar to friendship so far as Kate herself was concerned, but her experience of the manners of the genuine working-man, whom she had met in shoals returning from their occupations when she had taken her pictures to Mr. Pratt, caused her to shrink in nervous horror at the

notion of laying herself under a heavy obligation to one of them.

And yet what was she to do? It was impossible for her to pass the night in the streets; and again, how could she express her objection to the society of Kate's father without wounding the feelings of her preserver?

But Kate Bartram, although she was not highly educated, had very keen perceptions, and at once she understood the difficulty under which her mysterious companion laboured. She took no offence at it, however, nor did it seem to her in any way unreasonable. From the first there had been a very curious sentiment in this young woman's mind where Ruth was concerned. Her admiration for the noble-looking girl was intense; to the pale fragile worker, Mr. Pratt's young lady artist had appeared a positive queen among women; and, therefore, Ruth's badly-concealed alarm at the notion of encountering her father did not arouse in Kate any spirit of anger.

In silence they walked on again for a little while, and then turning into a somewhat narrow street, in

a neighbourhood which, in the course of a century and a half, had run down from the height of fashion to the depth of poor lodging-house obscurity, Kate halted again.

“We live here,” she said, hesitatingly, indicating a house which Ruth could see, even in the fog, was very high, and built of bricks that were perfectly black with grime. A flight of stone steps led up to the substantial-looking but exceedingly shabby door, and so worn away was the centre of each step that it was easy to see the house at one time had been a very popular resort. There was nothing attractive about it now, however, at any rate to the outward view, and Ruth thought, as she glanced up at the forlorn-looking place with its dirty windows—some with blinds of different patterns, and some only with a bit of torn muslin pinned across them—that she had never seen a more uninviting place of residence, in comparison with which even Mrs. Burton’s house appeared clean and respectable.

“We live here,” Kate repeated, “and I have been trying to think how we can manage to make you comfortable.”

Ruth flushed, and the other continued nervously, "I hope you won't think me rude, but I must ask you a question ; did you really say you had no money?"

I have not a penny to-night," Ruth replied, miserably, "but I should have to-morrow, probably, if I could do some work."

Kate's face brightened visibly.

"Oh! that makes a difference," she said; "there is a furnished room to let on the same floor as ours, which you might have if I could tell the landlady you would pay for it to-morrow—she would trust me as far as that, I know. It's a poor room, a very poor room, for any one like you, but—but—you could be quite private there, and perhaps for a day or two you might be glad of it."

"Indeed I should!" Ruth responded very gratefully, recognizing at once her companion's delicacy in assuring her of privacy. "You cannot think how thankful I am to you ; for if the room is poor, so am I—very, very poor."

Ascending the worn steps with difficulty, Ruth saw Kate ring the upper of a long row of bell-

handles, and after they had waited what appeared to the tired girl an unconscionable time, the door was opened by an elderly man who carried a small lamp in his hand, and whose careworn countenance bore a striking resemblance to that of the young carver in wood.

The man uttered an exclamation of surprise when he saw that his daughter was not alone, but Kate, entering before Ruth, whispered a few words in his ear, and then with his grey eyebrows elevated in surprise, with a not ungraceful bow to his daughter's companion, he set his lamp down on a slab of wood which stuck out from the wall, and going towards the stairs began to mount them one foot at a time, breathing hard, as though the effort caused him great pain and difficulty.

"He had an accident on board ship," Kate whispered to Ruth; "the doctors say he may be a long time before his foot gets well, that is why he cannot go to look for work—poor father!"

Requesting Ruth to wait for an instant, Kate Bartram ran swiftly down the stairs to the basement floor, and Ruth heard her voice in eager dis-

cussion. She was absent only a couple of minutes, but when she returned flushed with success, she found that Ruth was shivering from head to foot.

"You are cold," she cried, anxiously; "I hope you will not take any harm—come up at once, the landlady is busy, for her baby is ill, poor little soul, but she will let you have the room for six shillings a week, and you are to pay her the first week in advance to-morrow, if you can."

"I shall be able to do that, I hope," Ruth responded; "but now give me my parcels, I am ashamed that you should have carried them so far; I never thought of them once."

But no inducements would prevail upon Kate to relinquish her hold of the things, and long before they had mounted to the top of the broad, shallow flights of stairs, which seemed positively interminable to the exhausted girl, she was thankful that she had only to drag herself along.

"How is it?" she panted, when three-quarters of the way up they stopped a minute that she might get her breath, "how is it that you can manage it so much better than I? you do not seem strong."

"Nor am I," Kate replied with a sigh, "but I have lived here for some time now, and I am used to it. Lean on me, I cannot bear to see you so tired, and I am frightened lest you should take cold standing here in the draught."

Ruth could hardly speak; since her mother's death she had not experienced such unselfish care as this shown to her by the poor working-girl who herself stood in such sore need of protection. Very touched, but cheered and warmed at heart by her companion's gentle consideration, she smiled at the anxious face.

"Do not worry yourself about me," she said, with a little falter in her voice, "I am much better now, and the draught is no worse for me than it is for you; I fancy my mantle is thicker than yours. Now, let us go on, I am quite rested now."

They were silent until they reached the top landing of all, on to which opened three discoloured but peculiarly substantial-looking doors with very deep lintels, which formed a recess, and struck Ruth as being most strange, until she learnt afterwards that the doors were remnants of the old

fittings, which had been allowed to remain while the oaken wainscots and cornices in the lower rooms had been removed and sold years and years before.

Pushing one of these doors open, Kate entered a dark room followed immediately by Ruth, who with difficulty repressed an exclamation of dismay at the forlorn aspect of the large apartment which the rays of the lamp revealed to her.

Here again Ruth's ignorance of money and money's worth was strongly exemplified. She had heard from Kate that the rent of the room was six shillings, and for six shillings she ought to have expected very little in the way of furniture. It had never occurred to her, however, that such a room as this could be considered furnished, and her heart sank as she looked about her.

The chamber was large, but the ceiling was low and perfectly black with the smoke of years; the grate was rusty, one of the bars was missing, and there was no fender. There were two windows, but one was minus a pane, which had been replaced by brown paper; while the furniture consisted of an

iron bedstead, straw palliasse, and pillow; a dirty deal table, two chairs, an old chest of drawers with a basin and ewer upon it, a painted cupboard, and a great wooden box, very black and forbidding, the use of which Ruth could not guess. Not a scrap of carpet or curtains, and for bed-clothes only one worn, and not too clean, blanket.

Glancing quickly at Kate, Ruth congratulated herself that she had not suffered any expression of disapproval to escape her, for the other positively beamed with pleasure as she looked around her.

“It was cleaned out yesterday,” she said, “I am so glad! The boards are discoloured, but they are not dirty, and in many respects this is the best room in the house. It is large and airy, and it is also quite open at the back here, and therefore of course it is very healthy; and it has another advantage: see these two big bolts on the door, one at the bottom and one at the top; the locks are very shaky in these old doors, and a few years ago there were some people in this room who were supposed to be coiners, and they had these bolts

put on. They are certainly a great comfort, for in a house as full as this, it is not very pleasant to fancy somebody may burst your door open in the night by mistake. Now, you sit down and rest; take off your wet mantle first, though, and I will be back in a minute."

With which Kate ran out of the room quickly, and, following her advice, Ruth removed the draggled, muddy cloak and hung it over the back of one of the chairs, wondering drearily whether it was possible it could ever be made to look decent again.

She was still standing with a very rueful countenance examining it, when Kate returned bearing in her hands a large shovel filled with hot smoking embers, which caused her to cough painfully but did not cloud the brightness of her face for an instant. Emptying the shovel quickly into the rusty grate, once more the girl ran away, coming back again immediately with wood and fresh coals: with these she speedily made a cheerful fire, and then drawing a chair close to it she insisted that Ruth should sit down and warm her half-

frozen feet, while she fetched the kettle preparatory to making her some hot tea.

But when Ruth had eaten and drank and there was nothing further that Kate could do for her, the wood-carver went towards the door at once, saying quietly,—

“Now I will leave you ; you will be glad to be alone, I know. Please understand this : both father and I will be proud and happy to serve you in any way that we can, but you must not fear we will ever force ourselves upon you.”

Interrupting her with a gesture, Ruth rose, and trembling sorely, supporting herself by the edge of the deal table, she gazed at her companion with quivering lips and moist eyes.

“Will you come to me for just one minute more ?” she faltered.

Returning to her at once, Kate looked anxiously into the moved countenance.

“I cannot thank you,” Ruth said, clasping one of the work-worn hands in hers, “my heart is too full, but God will reward you for what you have done. Now, there is one thing more I want.”

“And that is?”

“I want you to let me kiss you. Oh, my dear! my dear!” Ruth cried, throwing her arms round the girl’s neck in a burst of feeling. “Heaven bless you! Heaven bless you! you have saved me from despair to-night, and if happiness ever comes to me, and to one I love better than my life, we shall owe it to you—all, all to you! I pray God that he may grant me power to prove my gratitude to you.”

Silently the two girls clung to each other for a minute, and then, her face bathed in tears, but transfigured with joy, Kate Bartram stole gently from the room.

Ruth’s bedstead had been drawn close to the fire, and, warmed with the hot tea and comforted inexpressibly by the knowledge that a friend was near at hand, having carefully drawn the two bolts, she fell asleep almost directly she laid her head upon her hard pillow, little recking that within a dozen feet of her Kate Bartram lay shivering for the want of the thick rug with which she had supplemented Ruth’s one blanket, but with her heart aglow with

unselfish satisfaction; while the father carefully scraped out the embers of the fire lest they should not have sufficient fuel to light it as well as that of their pensioner, the next morning.

It was ten o'clock when Ruth forgot her troubles in sleep, and at that moment Mrs. Burton was summoned to the parlour by a loud ring of the bell. Entering it with a very dismal countenance, she confronted a young man with a fair beard and moustache, blue eyes and a thin anxious countenance, who was clothed in rough shabby garments, which however did not altogether conceal the athletic elegant lines of his well-knit figure.

"Has your nephew come back?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes, sir, he have;" Mrs. Burton murmured, mournfully.

"Well?"

"Well, he ain't brought no news, sir; she's gone, evidently. She paid her bill this afternoon just about an hour before you come, sir, and she must have gone directly afterwards. I am real sorry, sir, for all of us, for it's ten shillings out of my pocket for that there advertisement."

Taking up his cap the young man rose, and placing half-a-crown on the table, said hopelessly,—

“I shall go out now myself, and make inquiries at all the police-stations in the neighbourhood—she may have met with an accident; any way it’s no good my sitting here any longer. I shall go mad if I do. If she returns for Heaven’s sake don’t let her out of your sight again until I come to-morrow morning, and give her that letter.”

Mrs. Burton promised, and without another word her mysterious visitor quitted the house, and walking down the street with long rapid strides, groaned out in accents of despair,—

“Oh, God! it is cruel, cruel! to have missed her after all. If I had only seen that advertisement one hour earlier! Oh, my darling! my darling! where are you? Perhaps you are in danger at this very moment, and crying to me for help!”

But Jack Rathbone’s agony would have been further intensified could he have known that at the moment he knocked at Mrs. Burton’s door, his lost love had stood within ten yards of him.

CHAPTER XI.

RUTH was hard at work when the next morning at eight o'clock Kate entered ; she was sitting near one of the windows wrapped in her mantle, for the early mornings were bitterly cold, and her canvas was propped up on the deal table against a chair. Kate uttered an exclamation of surprise on beholding her.

“ Why didn't you let me know that you were awake ? ” she cried ; “ I did not hear you stirring, though I listened ; these walls are so thick nothing but a loud sound can penetrate them. I am so sorry, you must be perished with cold. It is bitter this morning.”

“ It is cold, certainly,” Ruth answered, observing, with a pain at her heart, the thin threadbare clothing of the young Samaritan ; “ but I have been so busy I have scarcely noticed it. I think I shall

have done all I can do to this sketch by middle day, and then I shall be able to discharge some of my debts. What I owe to *you* I can never repay."

Kate Bartram's pinched face flushed with pleasure. "Don't thank me any more," she murmured, busying herself about the room. "You will never know the delight it has given me to serve you in any way. Now I will make your fire, and by that time our kettle will be boiling, and you shall have some breakfast. I am afraid it will be but a poor one, for we have no butter and no milk, but father will make you some toast."

Touched to the quick, Ruth sprang up, and raising the girl from her kneeling position before the grate, pressed her lips to the careworn forehead.

"You must not do this for me, indeed!" she faltered; "I am quite able to help myself now, and you have other work as well as I have."

But Kate begged so earnestly to be allowed to light her fire and get her breakfast just for this once, that Ruth, perceiving a refusal would hurt her benefactor, gave in with a very grateful smile,

which cheered her poor young worshipper like a ray of sunlight.

By one o'clock Ruth had finished her task, and then, cramped and stiff from the uneasy position in which she had been sitting for so many hours, she rose, and packing up her picture with the utmost care, assumed her mantle, which Kate had insisted should be handed over to her father that he might scrub and brush it into as decent a condition as possible; and then, quaking with fear, lest Mr. Pratt should prove more unreasonable with regard to this sketch than he had ever done before, she went out. When she returned an hour later, her spirits had risen so considerably that she was actually able to laugh when she reached the top of the stairs, and found Kate awaiting her with an anxious and questioning face.

"It's all right," she cried, "better than I could have hoped; come in and I will tell you."

They entered Ruth's room, and she gave a little cry of surprise. Across the windows had been nailed clean but extensively mended white muslin blinds, and in front of the grate was an old fender

which had been carefully brushed up, and a rug made of odds and ends of bright coloured druggets.

"Why, how did these things come here?" Ruth asked; "has the landlady been up?"

"No, the landlady will come this afternoon for the rent," Kate answered; "father brushed up the fender and he made the rug too. I hope you don't think it very rude of me to have put the things here, without asking you."

Ruth clasped her companion's hands warmly, speaking her thanks in a faltering voice, and then turning quickly away, that the other might not see how much moved she was, she took off her hat and cloak and placed upon the table half-a-dozen packages.

"There," she said, "I have done my marketing; I have bought a canvas, and I can start another picture directly I have had my dinner. I have ordered a sack of coals too, and some wood, as you suggested, but I have not seen the landlady to ask her where they are to be put."

"Oh, they will have to be put in there," Kate said, cheerfully pointing to the great black box; "all the

lodgers in this house envy you that coal-box ; see, it is lined with tin, the rest of us have to keep our coals in the bottom of our cupboards, and then, you know, the blacks will settle on our food."

"I should think so," Ruth assented, laughingly. "But I am glad you have pointed out the advantages of that box. I was actually going to ask to have it removed. I never thought of keeping my coals up here ; but since I shall have to wait upon myself, it is certainly much more convenient."

"Of course it is," Kate replied, "and you need never take down your cinders to the dusthole yourself, because father will do that for you as well as me. It takes him a long while to get down, poor dear, but he insists upon it."

Ruth thanked her warmly, and then she continued, brightly,—

"Mr. Pratt was so kind, I think he wanted to make up to me for last night ; I fancied him hard then, but I know now that I was unjust ; when one is in trouble one is apt to exact sympathy, but now I see that of course Mr. Pratt did not at all understand my horrible position."

Kate made no response, and Ruth, rather wondering at her silence, continued,—

“I showed Mr. Pratt my picture rather in fear and trembling, but directly he looked at it he said it was charming, and he actually suggested paying me a pound for it instead of fifteen shillings, as the weather had been so bad and I had had more than the usual amount of trouble with it. I was really quite ashamed of my former harsh thoughts of him. I am afraid I looked terribly gloomy when I went in. I can assure you it is quite a relief to my mind to be able to re-instate him on his pedestal in my estimation.”

Kate Bartram murmured some faint congratulations, and then at once left the room that she might from her own scanty store supply her friend with two or three plates, and a knife, fork and spoon ; a cup and saucer Ruth had remembered to buy and bring with her.

The artist's repast consisted of some cold meat and some bread, but she ate it with a thankful spirit and more appetite than she had felt for many weeks. While she ate she pondered over the singu-

larity of Kate Bartram's manner where Mr. Pratt was concerned. And before she had finished her meal she imagined she had found a solution of the mystery.

From what Mr. Pratt had told her she was aware that he considered Kate Bartram to be lazy, and that he had even felt it his duty to reprove her for want of energy. Knowing Kate as she now did, it was impossible for Ruth to credit her with any such serious fault as laziness, but taking into consideration her apparent delicacy, she came to the conclusion it was more than likely the wood carver was very slow in her work, and that, resenting what she considered undeserved reproaches from Mr. Pratt, that she had received his well-meant admonitions in anything but a kindly spirit.

Ruth had only time to sketch in her fresh landscape before the light failed her, but she had plenty to occupy her in tidying up her room and in putting away her purchases in the cupboard. She was still flitting busily about when she heard a laborious step ascending the stairs, and almost immediately afterwards the landlady entered the

room, bearing in her arms a sickly-looking infant, which she declared, however, in answer to Ruth's gentle inquiries, was pulling round splendidly.

The woman received her new lodger's money with evident satisfaction, and then looking around her she said,—

“Well, you looks very comfortable here, I must say; a bright rug and a bit of blind do cheer a room up, there's no mistake about that. Bartram's room looked another place when he put that there rug down. Oh, and you've got their fender and her blanket too, have you? Well, I told her that I didn't think one blanket would be enough for you, but I couldn't spare no more than that. I wonder how she managed?”

“What do you mean?” Ruth cried, in great distress; “not that Kate Bartram took the blanket off her own bed to give it to me! Oh, not that, not that! It was such a bitter night; I had a fire too, and I am sure she had none in her bedroom.”

“No, that she hadn't, I'll be bound; the Bartrams are none too well off for coals or anything

else, poor bodies, though the girl do work her fingers pretty well to the bone too; but there, you see her father's a heavy drag on her. Well, Miss, I'm sorry I told you about the blanket and the other things if it puts you about, but she must have taken it off her own bed; she had only got that and a little sleezy thing with no warmth in it at all, and she's not the gal to let her father go cold to warm herself."

For a few minutes after the woman left her Ruth was absolutely crushed by the misery that this revelation caused her; that she should have been warmed and comforted at the other girl's expense was horrible to think of, and she almost hated herself for what she now considered her blamable credulity.

"I ought to have disbelieved her when she said she did not want it," she thought, wringing her hands and pacing her room excitedly; "oh, what must she have thought of me all through the long, cold night? I wonder she did not catch her death! I shall never forgive myself if harm has come to her through my carelessness."

And then, seizing her hat and mantle, she ran down the dark stairs with dangerous rapidity.

"She shall not be cold to-night," she murmured ; "thank Heaven I have ten shillings left ; she shall not be cold to-night if I have to live on bread and water until this picture is finished."

To her surprise and relief, Ruth discovered that at a shop in the immediate neighbourhood she could buy the counterpart of the striped rug which had covered her bed the previous night, at an outlay of five shillings and sixpence, and with her parcel she returned to the house as quickly as possible ; but when, on entering her room again, she found Kate Bartram once more on her knees attending to the fire which she had neglected to replenish before going out, she was overcome with such a flood of gratitude, that the words she had prepared died away before she could utter them, and clinging to her benefactor she could only sob convulsively and pant out incoherent sentences which alarmed her companion seriously.

At length, however, Kate gathered the excited girl's meaning, and then she hastily disengaged her-

self from the clinging arms, and with her cheeks suffused with blushes, retreated until a yard or two intervened between them.

“Oh, pray, pray don’t cry like this, Miss Martin!” she said, in much confusion; “indeed, you have no reason to blame yourself. I shall tell Mrs. Stone that I am very angry for what she has said; I never meant you to know anything about it—I hope you believe that?”

“Indeed I do!” Ruth cried, “and that makes me respect you and hate myself more and more. But you shall not be cold to-night, my dear, for my sake.”

“What do you mean?” Kate Bartram asked, in much alarm. “Miss Martin, you are not going to be so cruel as to refuse my help; I am used to privations, they do not hurt me, but you could not bear what I can.”

Ruth made no reply, until, with a sobbing catch in her breath, she had untied her package; then she held the new rug towards her companion.

“See!” she faltered, “I have bought this one for you, not for myself. Oh, Kate! you must

et me keep yours—I would not part with it for the world.”

The two girls kissed each other lovingly, and Kate’s eyes as well as Ruth’s were moist, but she took the coverlet with a simple “thank you,” and then pointing to the rug and fender, she said,—

“I will move away those things if you wish it, Miss Martin, but I hope you will not ask me to do so. Father and I are so poor, so poor, we can never do anything to help any one; let us have that pleasure for once, it was father’s thought that I should bring them this morning, and I have not seen him so bright for a long time. Don’t ask me to take them away, it would grieve him, I know.”

“No,” said Ruth, very gravely, “I will not ask you, I accept them gratefully; tell your father so, and tell him, too, that I thank God for the blessing of your friendship.”

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Jack Rathbone arrived in Montreal in June, the fears aroused in his mind by the unexpected and sudden summons he had received, which had necessitated his changing his original plans, were more than justified. His property in Montreal was invested in a business house dealing in furs; this business had suffered severely through injudicious management during Jack's long legal minority, and now, in spite of all his exertions, it went smash altogether.

Jack saved his good name and paid all the debts of the house, but on the morning he turned his back on Canada, with the exception of some loose money, amounting to something under a hundred pounds, he had nothing else that he could call his own in the colony.

He left Montreal carrying with him the respect

and warm good wishes of all with whom he had come in contact, but a terrible weight lay upon his heart, and lines of care began to show themselves in his hitherto unfurrowed brow. The loss of at least half his fortune was a very serious trouble to Jack; the more so as the news he had recently received from Australia in connection with the gold mine in which the rest of his money was invested, was of an extremely disquieting nature; but both these most weighty causes of anxiety became light in comparison with the trouble that lay much nearer to his heart—that of Ruth's inexplicable silence.

The voyage was an unfortunate one, the vessel being delayed several times, and long before Jack reached Melbourne, to which port he was bound, he had worked himself into a condition of perfect fever on Ruth's account; but when, having driven hastily to the hotel to which he had been recommended before leaving England, he found a little packet of letters in her well-beloved hand awaiting him, the sensation of relief which swept over him was almost painful in its intensity, and he had hard work to

conceal his emotion from the master of the hotel, who had himself taken charge of the missives.

Catching hastily at the packet, Jack followed the waiter quickly to a private room, and then he tore the first envelope open, revelling in the comfort which had come in such a flood to warm his hungry heart. He was conscious of no misgivings; everything seemed right to him then, his darling was well and loved him better than ever; she even wrote happily and cheerfully, and Jack was far too unselfish to feel anything but satisfaction in this evidence that she was able to bear up against adverse circumstances.

But when the first gush of his delight and relief was past, Jack leant back in the wicker chair—in so doing dropping the second letter—and ruffling his fair hair, began to think, and as he reflected, the expression of perplexity in his honest blue eyes deepened and deepened, until at length he rose, and began walking up and down the room with quick nervous steps.

“It baffles me altogether,” he mused; “what on earth is the meaning of it? I can only imagine

still that the telegram never arrived at 'The Lodge.' This letter was posted, so far as I can make out, the morning after I left, and of course the telegram should have been there by seven o'clock the previous evening."

Slapping his brown fist into his open palm, Jack came to a sudden stand.

"By Jove!" he cried aloud, "I begin to think now that somehow or other none of my letters have reached her either, and that she doesn't even know I have been to Montreal. I wonder whether that smiling nigger at the hotel ever posted them? I'd bet a sovereign he didn't; well, if so, it's as well for him I've found it out when he is not within reach of the top of my boot. What a brute! I suppose he suppressed them for the sake of the stamps. Well, when I've nothing more important to do I'll write to the master and put him on his guard against that fellow. And he used to grin at me so sympathetically too, and seemed quite cut up every time he had to tell me no letter had come for me. What a fool I have been! I really fancied he had a fellow-feeling for me; he was always so anxious

that I shouldn't miss the mail too, confound him!"

Again seating himself, Jack took up the letter once more.

"It's queer, though," he thought; "if she imagined I wasn't at Montreal, why are there not more letters here? By George! but there was another; I am certain there were two—what has become of it?"

Rising, he shifted the lounge, and then pouncing upon the envelope which had fallen between it and the table, he exclaimed, joyfully,—

"Here it is! Oh, my darling, if I had left it there! Why, I might even have gone away without seeing it, for it's certain I must push on to-morrow morning; I've Ruth's interest to think of as well as my own."

His face glowing with tender satisfaction, Jack opened the envelope, but before he turned the first page the smile faded out of his comely countenance, and as he read little impatient sighs and murmurs escaped his lips. Presently, having finished, he laid the missive upon his knees, and then bringing his

hand heavily down upon the table he relieved his feelings by an energetic—

“Confound this Felix Dent, whoever he is! Why in the world does Ruth want to fill up her pages with descriptions and accounts of Felix Dent, especially if he is so unattractive, as she says he is? Good heavens! he is not in the least interesting to me.”

Springing up once more, Jack began rapidly walking the room, with his hands thrust deep into his pockets, gnawing his fair moustache fiercely, with an angry frown between his brows. By-and-by, however, his pace grew slower, and then returning to the table he took up the letter again, with almost an apologetic sigh,—

“What a brute I am, really, and what a fool too!” he mused, in a very contrite spirit. “I am afraid my poor girl stands the chance of having a terribly jealous husband. Well, I can’t help it, though I am ashamed of it. I am jealous of her father even, and, what’s more, I don’t believe people who are really in love are ever altogether free from the green-eyed monster. After

all, it's quite natural that she should talk about this fellow, bless her heart! and of course she thought what interested her would interest me, and so it does, but—well—” Jack continued, folding up the letter with a half angry little laugh, “well, I am glad Felix Dent isn't brilliant, at any rate; I shouldn't compare favourably with him if he were, that's quite certain. But whether he is brilliant or not, he can see my darling, confound him! and he can listen to her dear voice, and I suppose she's bound to shake hands with him at any rate twice every time he goes there. This wretched botany too! Well, it's very hard lines on me, that's all I can say.”

But though Ruth's second communication was far less pleasing to Jack than the first, as is usual in such cases it was the second letter which he read and re-read until every word in it was positively graven on his memory, and the more he read the more uneasy he grew. He could not, even to himself, altogether explain this uneasiness; he did not dare to doubt Ruth's love, but there was a curious air of constraint about the second letter

which impressed him painfully, for it seemed to him that she was concealing something from him.

This, indeed, had been the case, but it was her disagreements with her step-mother which, fearing to cause him anxiety, the girl had been at such pains to keep out of her correspondence with her lover.

Jack Rathbone was compelled to quit Melbourne and go up country the following morning; he hoped that he might be able to transact his business and return within a week at the outside, and in the course of a sleepless night he made up his mind what to do.

In the first relief of receiving Ruth's letters he had not attached any particular importance to there being only two; but on thinking the matter over, while he smoked a quiet pipe and wandered up and down in the cool of the evening,—for although it was the middle of August, the Australian winter was scarcely over,—he came to the conclusion that the first letter being written the night he left, and the second not until the middle of July, some six weeks later, was a very singular circumstance.

If, however, the second letter had been more

satisfactory he would not have been rendered in any way uneasy by this peculiar fact, but as it was he could not help being disquieted by it. It was quite evident to Jack that Felix Dent had been a visitor to 'The Lodge' for some little time when it was written, and he could not rid himself of the idea that possibly it was in consequence of the stranger's monopolizing Ruth's time that she had found so little to spare for him. His head ached with want of sleep and worry when he rose in the morning.

"I will cable," he thought, "to Sir Richard this time; I must have news of her, there might be another letter in a day or two, according to the date of the last, but perhaps she will let another six weeks elapse before she writes me a third. Ah! no, no!" he went on, the hard expression fading out of his eyes suddenly, "I will not doubt my darling; there is some wretched mistake all round. Well, I'll send my cable, any way; it will be an immense satisfaction to hear it's all right, for I may have to stay over here for weeks if things are in as bad a condition as I fear. I am deucedly uncomfortable; I suppose I am not as plucky as I might

be because I am not used to trouble—but then any trouble connected with Ruth! Great Heaven! I believe it would kill me if anything came between us!”

Jack made his cable to Sir Richard as short as possible, but when he started up country the small amount of ready-money with which he had landed had been considerably diminished. A fortnight elapsed before he once more walked into the Melbourne Hotel, and then so startling was the alteration in his appearance, that the master of the establishment could scarcely restrain an exclamation of astonishment.

Jack's fresh-complexioned cheery face had elongated and grown pale and worn, and in the thick hair at his temples it was easy to see streaks of silver. It was evident, too, that he had not shaved since he left Melbourne, for a stubbly fair beard, in a most unbecoming state of progress, covered and half concealed his well-shaped chin.

“You are ill, Mr. Rathbone, surely?” the hotel keeper cried.

“No, I am not ill, but I am down on my luck,

that's all. There's a cable here for me, I suppose?" Jack continued, his voice trembling with eagerness.

"Yes, there is," the other replied, "it came three days after you left. I should have sent it on if I hadn't been afraid of its crossing you on the road; when you started you told me you expected to be back here in four or five days. Go to your mistress," he continued, to a chamber-maid who was passing at the moment, "ask her to give you that cable for Mr. Rathbone. I am sorry your business has not gone well," he went on, turning to Jack again; "can I be of service to you?"

Jack shook his head dolefully.

"No, I am afraid not, thank you, neither you nor any other man. You have heard of the failure of the Millbank-Gold Mine, of course?"

"Why, yes, the papers have been full of it for the last week; the vein of gold has suddenly given out, hasn't it?"

Jack nodded.

"I have fifty thousand pounds invested in that mine," he said, miserably, "and the shares have

gone down from ten pounds to eighteen pence ; that's not very cheerful for a man who has never learnt a trade, is it ? ”

The hotel-keeper's face fell, and an expression of such real sympathy came into his eyes, that the young man's sore heart was touched, and impulsively he stretched out his hand and clasped that of his companion.

“ Thank you,” he said, “ I won't reject your sympathy, Mr. Thompson, for I am very down, I'll own. It's not for myself I care, but—I say, your girl's a long while gone for that cable.”

“ It's a good step to my private rooms,” Thompson answered ; “ she'll be back in a minute. Have they closed the Millbank Mine, then ? ”

“ No,” Jack replied, with a hopeless shrug of the shoulders ; “ we had a meeting of shareholders the day before yesterday, that's what delayed me, and we have all put every penny we had to our credit into the affair to keep the works going as long as possible ; it's our only chance, they seem to think we may hit gold again if we bore long enough. I was bound to come to Melbourne to see a lawyer,

and then I'm going back again. They've given me a post at the mines to look after things a bit, that's all I have to live upon at present. By-the-bye, I'll keep my bedroom here for a day or two, but you can let my private sitting-room; economy will have to be the order of the day with me now, I can assure you."

But the hotel-keeper, in whom the young man's depressed face had excited quite a fatherly interest, would not hear of this, declaring that he should be perfectly willing to wait for his bill until the Millbank Mine pulled round again, which he fully believed it would.

Thompson's face belied his cheerful words, for the general impression with regard to the gold mine was, that it was a perfectly hopeless affair, but his hearty kindness was a consolation to Jack, who for the last fortnight had come into contact only with those who, themselves being sufferers from the same cause, could spare no sympathy for one who was young and strong, and who at any rate had not the additional misery of feeling that in his own ruin was involved that of wife and children.

Therefore, having kept silence while others bemoaned their fates aloud, it was some relief to Jack to blurt out his troubles to this stranger, and when the hotel-keeper insisted on his having a glass of champagne in which to drink better luck to the Millbank Mine, Jack could not find it in his heart to decline the man's kindly hospitality. He despatched it as quickly as possible, however, fidgeting and fuming the while at the maid's protracted absence ; but he had been pacing his private room for full five minutes before she appeared with the envelope in her hand, explaining, with profuse apologies, that her mistress had put it safely away, and had had great difficulty in recollecting where.

A quarter of an hour afterwards a hasty knock came to the door of the office in which Mr. Thompson transacted the business of his house, and without waiting for an answer, Jack entered in a condition of the wildest excitement and distress.

CHAPTER XIII.

MR. THOMPSON rose with an exclamation of dismay as his eyes encountered the agitated face, but paying no heed to the surprise and anxiety he expressed, the young man cried, somewhat harshly,—

“Don’t speak to me, Thompson—don’t ask me any questions, but tell me quick: when does the next ship leave for England?”

Mr. Thompson took up a newspaper that was lying near, and ran his forefinger rapidly down the column wherein the shipping intelligence was advertised.

“The *Stirling Castle* starts to-morrow morning at ten.”

“But is there not one that goes this afternoon?” Jack cried. “It’s only two, now. Are you sure

there is not one before ten o'clock to-morrow morning ? ”

Mr. Thompson lifted his eyebrows in astonishment.

“ I am quite sure of it,” he answered quickly.

“ Then there is no help for it,” Jack replied, with a groan of impatience. “ I must wait until to-morrow.”

“ Are you thinking of returning to England ? ” Thomspon inquired, more surprised than ever.

“ Yes, I must go at once, at once ! ” the young man responded in great distress. “ It nearly drives me mad to think that this cable has been here for over a week. However, it can't be helped,” he went on, striving to regain his control over himself ; “ it's nobody's fault. I mustn't lose my head, that's quite certain. Thompson, how much is a steerage passage to London ? ”

“ A steerage passage ! Mr. Rathbone, you surely are not thinking of going as a steerage passenger to England ? ”

Shaking his head impatiently, Jack interrupted him,—

"Tell me how much it costs," he cried.

"It costs thirteen or fourteen pounds."

Thrusting his hands into his pockets, Jack flung a small handful of gold and silver coins sharply on to the table, and counted them eagerly. But when he came to reckon up his means he found that in the little heap the gold coins were very very few and far between, and that the whole sum, counted over twice in the hope that he might have made a mistake, amounted only to a trifle over six pounds. Jack stared at the money with a rueful countenance for a minute or so, and then, unfastening his albert chain, he pulled his gold watch from his pocket.

"Advise me how to sell this," he said, abruptly.

"Sell your watch, Mr. Rathbone!" Thompson exclaimed. "Can I not accommodate you for a little while?"

"No, no, man," Jack went on, almost ungracious in his misery, "I cannot borrow money. Heaven knows if I should ever be able to repay it. The watch isn't worth much, I know; it was my father's and is old-fashioned, but my dressing-bag cost five-

and-twenty guineas—I ought to get something for that. That’s all I have left now, for I sold my diamond rings and studs at Montreal. Come, don’t stare at me like that, but help me, if you can. I don’t know what I am saying or doing scarcely, and that’s a fact.”

“But, Mr. Rathbone,” Thompson stammered, “surely you are acting hastily. Did I not understand you to say that you had decided to accept a post at the Millbank Mine?”

“But that was before I received this cable,” Jack replied in an agony of impatience. “For mercy’s sake don’t argue with me. I must start for England in the *Stirling Castle*. If my fortunes go to rack and ruin altogether I can’t help it; they are black enough now, Heaven knows. But if by staying I could be certain of reinstating them altogether I could not do so.”

Much distressed, but convinced at length that it was perfectly hopeless to attempt to quiet the young man, Mr. Thompson took the watch and chain, and desiring Jack to give him the bag, assumed his greatecoat, and suggested that he should himself

dispose of the things, feeling sure he would get a better price for them.

A few minutes before nine—by a curious coincidence the very hour at which, some thousands of miles away, Ruth concluded her first business transaction with Mr. Abraham Moss—Mr. Thompson returned and handed to Jack a small packet of money.

“There are eighteen pounds,” he said; “I couldn’t get a penny more. But I wish—upon my soul, Mr. Rathbone, I am quite genuine in what I say—I wish you would let me make the amount sufficient to pay for a second-class passage, at least. I am well off, and I can’t bear to think of a man who has been used to the comforts of life going as a steerage passenger.”

Jack was firm, but he clasped Thompson’s hand warmly.

“I thank you as much as if I had accepted your generous offer,” he said, “but I have now enough to take me to England, and to keep me the first two or three weeks when I get there. I need not worry myself on that account, therefore,

and what brain power I do possess I can concentrate on another and far more important object."

Thompson made one more effort to persuade the other to accept his help, but turning on him almost fiercely, Jack cried aloud,—

"Look here, if you were in my position would you do it yourself? I know you wouldn't—I can see it in your face. An hour after I had started, if I took your money, you would begin to think I was a mean sort of fellow, and you would be right. Why, man, the worst thing that could happen to me at present would be personal ease bought at the expense of my self-respect. I wish I could work my passage home; I should be thankful for anything that would distract my thoughts until I got to England, and could do something."

"I will say no more," Thompson replied. "I don't wish to offend you, and yet——"

"Say anything you feel inclined," Jack interrupted; "don't punish me for my ungracious manner."

"Well, then," continued Thompson, glancing at his haggard companion uneasily, "as you have deter-

mined to be independent, at least listen calmly to a piece of advice."

"I'll try to, at any rate," Jack replied, with a wan smile.

"Then call yourself by some other name on board the *Stirling Castle*."

"But why?"

"For this reason," Thompson went on, earnestly: "I have been sounding people on the subject of the Millbank Mine, trying to find out how far the real state of the case is known, in fact, and I've discovered that the determination to continue to work the mine—which is reported in the evening papers—has somewhat startled the Melbourne public, and that they are inclined to think the affair may not be quite so shaky as they had imagined. Indeed, there is a rumour going about that one of the principal shareholders, whose name—your own—they give in full, has come to the rescue bravely, and has promised to throw the whole of his wealth into the enterprise."

"His wealth!" Jack cried, gloomily; "what do they mean?"

“They are on the wrong scent, of course,” Thompson continued, eagerly; “but I naturally didn’t take the trouble to contradict the truth of the statement; and, so far as I can, you may be sure I shall do my best to keep the rumour afloat.”

“But what’s the good of allowing a bit of humbug like that to take root?”

“Don’t you see, my dear fellow?” the other responded, warmly; “the Millbank Mine may revive after all, and if the public can be worked up to have a little faith in it, its chances of pulling round are tremendously strengthened. Why, look here—what you want now is money to enable you to go on working the mine for two, or even three months, if necessary: and I myself heard a man say to-night—a man to whom fifty thousand pounds is a mere nothing—that he was more than half inclined to buy up a couple of thousand shares at their present rate, and throw ten thousand into the working of the mine into the bargain. Now, considering that you won’t be able to continue boring for more than a month or so with your present capital, such a man as that oughtn’t to be frightened?”

"Of course not," Jack replied, in a tone of such utter depression that the other, who had wished to instil a little hope into him, winced with sympathy. "I am afraid I am dense to-night, Thompson, but I don't see your meaning even now."

"I mean this. The person I speak of, Henry Bellew, fancies that there is another rich man backing the business up. Well, you can't help that—you had nothing to do with the report, and for the sake of others it is your duty not to contradict it. It is Bellew's belief in you which has induced him to think favourably of the matter, and I suppose you have some faith in things coming right?"

"I had this morning," Jack answered, with a sigh. "I really believed that if we could go on long enough we should find gold again. The people who understand such things fancy it is only a slip in the vein, and that we shall probably come across it again in a lateral direction if we can pay the working of the mine; but I don't know what to say this afternoon. I am afraid I am a Jonah on board any ship just now."

"Oh, that's all nonsense!" Thompson interrupted, heartily. "I don't know what your new trouble is, though I cannot doubt that it is a heavy one; but whatever it is, you have no right, either on your own account or that of others, to deliberately enlarge a hole in a leaking ship."

Wearily Jack passed his hand over his lined forehead.

"Tell me what you mean plainly," he said. "Of course, I wish to do my duty towards my fellow shareholders."

"Well, then," continued Thompson, firmly, "don't let it be known that John Rathbone, who is supposed to be such a substantial prop to the tottering fortunes of the mine, has gone to England as a steerage passenger because he hasn't a sovereign to bless himself with!"

For some few minutes Jack argued this matter rather hotly, declaring in great bitterness of spirit that he would in no way be a party to deceiving the public even indirectly; but the trouble he had gone through had weakened him to some extent, and being unable either to deny the justice of Thompson's words, or

to express any satisfactory reason why he should give so fatal a *coup de grace* to the fortunes of the Millbank Mine, he most reluctantly gave Thompson his promise that he would embark on the *Stirling Castle* the following day under the name of John Thornton.

Having attained his object by a considerable effort, and indirectly having done an incalculable amount of harm by persuading Jack to adopt an *alias*, Thompson withdrew, and without a moment's delay summoned a journeyman painter, who, under his directions, painted out the name of Rathbone on Jack's trunks, and inserted that of Thornton instead.

When the unhappy young man went to his bedroom a couple of hours later, the trunks, with the paint still wet upon them, stood in the passage outside, but he took no heed of them. Before leaving his sitting-room he had once more read the cable message, which he still held crumpled in his hand, and as he walked he seemed to see the fatal words floating in the air on every side :

“August 15th, 1891. From Richard Forrest to John Rathbone. I know nothing of my daughter; she left her home August 10th—I fear not alone. God comfort you.”

CHAPTER XIV.

THE *Stirling Castle* left the shores of Australia under the most auspicious circumstances, the wind was fair, and the sea almost ominously tranquil; but within a fortnight the aspect of affairs underwent a complete change. The wind veered round into the most unsatisfactory quarter, the sea became rough, and to make matters worse, in consequence of the unusual strain upon it, a portion of the machinery connected with the engines which worked the mighty screw became seriously weakened, and for days and days the crippled ship laboured on making scarcely any progress at all.

As a rule the passengers on board the *Stirling Castle* were able to extract comfort from the assurances of the officers that there was no danger whatever in the situation of the ship, although the voyage would be prolonged in all probability to

almost double its ordinary duration ; but to Jack, whose blood was fevered with impatience, the delay was well nigh insupportable ; he could not in any case have commenced his search for his lost love for a month at least, but every extra hour that was added to that terrible interval of inaction became a positive agony.

His surroundings, too, were calculated to increase infinitely the depression of spirits by which he was almost crushed. Steerage passengers on a homeward bound vessel are, *en masse*, of a very different class to those who are going out from the old world to the colonies. Outward-bound they are generally energetic, capable men and women, going to battle with the unknown with fearless, hopeful hearts, with only a sprinkling among them of ne'er-do-weels ; but coming home the ne'er-do-weels become the rule, and respectability the exception, and the steerage passengers are composed mainly of men who having, through their own unworthiness, proved failures in the new country, are returning to the old, to sponge if possible upon friends and relations, and, in the event of these proving ada-

mantine, to become burdens to whatever parish they can foist a claim upon.

Having neither money nor inclination to gamble nor to stand drinks to the disreputable crew among whom it was his hard lot to be thrown for a time, Jack experienced for the first time what it was to be thoroughly unpopular with his fellow-men, who resented the presence among them of the young "toff," as he was called, who would not join in their games or drinking bouts, who changed his flannel shirt twice a week, and who expressed by his silence and grim expression, the utmost disapproval and contempt for their amusements and the tone of their conversation, which was, as a rule, of a ribald nature, and freely interlarded with oaths of every possible description.

Thus it came about Jack soon learnt the truth of the paradox that it is in the midst of a crowd one suffers the most acute sensation of loneliness and desolation; but uncongenial as his associates were, he did not even dare to seek the relief he would have felt in detaching himself from them, for Mr. Thompson, whose real friendship he could

not doubt, had urged upon him, at the very moment of starting, the absolute necessity, in the interests of others, as well as of himself, of avoiding the attention of the saloon and second-class passengers, in case there should be among them any one with whom he had come in contact during his short stay in Australia; and to enforce this fact upon his abstracted listener, Thompson had pointed out to Jack that his height and appearance generally would be calculated to bring him under notice in such miserable surroundings, unless he kept as much out of sight as possible, and that the best method of effacement was never to separate himself from his companions.

Jack's perceptions were blunted by trouble, but he could not deny that Thompson had reason on his side, nor that it might seriously affect the almost hopeless prospects of the unfortunate gold mine if he were to be recognized in such poverty-stricken circumstances; and, therefore, when he might have been comparatively at peace, pacing the deck in solitude, he endured, as best he might, the gibes and coarse jests of his companions, who con-

sidered him a wet blanket, and would willingly have given him all the privacy possible under the circumstances.

Under favourable conditions the *Stirling Castle* should have made the port of London in about thirty days, but the thirty-first morning found them with not more than two-thirds of the distance accomplished, and still the adverse winds prevailed, and the enfeebled engines laboured on until sometimes Jack, in his despair, fancied that the heart of the ship was slowly breaking as his was, and each painful throb found an echo in his own breast.

Day after day he emerged from the stifling cabin, and looked around him with anxious straining eyes, but there was no variety in the deadly monotony of wind and sea, and at length a terrible fear seized upon Jack that he should never reach England, that the ship was stationary, that it would labour on until coals and food were exhausted, and that then they would slowly perish, derelicts upon the cruel waste of waters; and under the influence of this ghastly fear, which was born of his utter depression,

the young man became positively morose, and more than once narrowly escaped a fight with one or other of his turbulent companions.

At this period, most fortunately for Jack, an accident occurred on board, which, by distracting him from his own particular griefs, did him incalculable good.

Among the steerage passengers, in marked contrast to the generality of them, he had noticed an unhealthy-looking, careworn man of about fifty years of age, whose countenance, notwithstanding its extreme thinness and the melancholy which always overspread it, appealed to him as being of a very superior order. Jack's occasional observation of this stranger could not be said to amount to a feeling of interest; his own trouble was of too absorbing a nature for him to be able to give more than a passing thought to any other subject; but sometimes he would look at this man with positive envy. He, like Jack, seldom spoke, but he was able to nurse his grief, whatever it might be, in quiet; and many a time, when the young man's glance fell upon the lonely figure leaning against

the bulwarks, he would have given everything he possessed to have done likewise, and so have escaped the coarse laughter and the din of many voices by which he was constantly surrounded.

It was the thirty-third day of their voyage, and Jack's depression had reached a culminating point, when his attention was aroused by a sudden lurch of the vessel, and then the noise of a heavy fall, succeeded by a groan of pain.

It happened that Rathbone formed one of a group who were lounging near the steep ladder-like flight of steps that led to the steerage cabin, and at once he ran to the head of this, and after peering anxiously into the semi-darkness began to descend it with quick firm steps. At the bottom of the ladder lay an inanimate form, which Jack discovered, on raising it, to be the melancholy-looking elderly man whom he had been envying not more than an hour before.

At the first moment Jack imagined the man must have been overcome with some description of fit, but almost at once he saw that he had fainted

from sheer pain, and that one of his feet was twisted under him in a sickening manner.

Lifting him in his arms, Jack carried the helpless man to his berth, and fetching his own spirit flask forced some of the contents between the livid lips. Then running up on deck again, he appealed to the group of men who were still lounging where he had left them, and one of them agreeing to go in search of the ship's surgeon, Jack returned to his charge, who by that time had opened his eyes, and was sitting up in his berth, gazing around him with a scared expression of such acute despair that Rathbone's heart responded to the unspoken trouble as readily as though it had been cried aloud.

Murmuring a few soothing words, he made the poor fellow lie down again, and then the surgeon having arrived, volunteered his services in the painful operation of reducing the terrible dislocation. When at length this had been accomplished, Jack's sympathy had developed into a feeling of warm admiration and respect. The sufferer was obviously in very feeble health, and yet he endured

without a groan tortures which even to witness made the beads of perspiration start upon the young man's forehead; and the pity he felt increased a hundred fold when, the surgeon having informed his patient that in all probability he would not be able to walk for many months, if he ever recovered the use of his foot; a cry of anguish, which no physical pain had had the power to evoke, escaped from the white quivering lips, while, closing his eyes, the poor man sank back upon his pillows speechless with misery.

After that those on deck had little occasion to chafe and fret under the burden of Jack's gloomy society, for he devoted himself with untiring patience to the uncomplaining sufferer, remaining with him day after day in the close cabin, tending him with the gentleness of a woman, and depriving himself of rest at night that he might apply the cooling lotions to the ankle and bathe the burning brow.

For a week and more, fevered with the anguish of his injury, which was of a most complicated and serious nature, Jack's charge lay in his berth, by an

iron determination suppressing the groans which his bodily and mental sufferings almost forced from him; and John Rathbone, or John Thornton as he was called, sat by his side, quite silent also, but anticipating, so far as it lay in his power, every wish of the sick man's, feeling himself more than repaid when the other raised his heavy eyelids for an instant, and murmuring his thanks faintly, pressed the kindly hand gratefully with his listless fingers.

By-and-by, however, as the pain of the dislocation grew more endurable, the fever passed away, and then the patient began to talk to his watchful attendant, and Jack, quickly perceiving that it was a relief to the over-burdened heart to speak its trouble, encouraged him to tell his story.

George Bartram was a cabinet-maker by trade, whose parents had been among the original settlers in Melbourne; his early education had been of the very slightest description, but being studious by nature, and having read diligently after working hours, by the time he attained manhood he was far better informed and more refined in his tastes than the majority of his associates. He married when

he was thirty, but his wife died two years afterwards, leaving him with an infant daughter, to whom he devoted himself with all the strength of an affectionate but somewhat melancholy temperament.

Bartram was an excellent workman, but his health was bad, and his resources being constantly drained on this account, he was never able to save money to any extent, and when his daughter Kate left school at the age of sixteen, he did not argue with her as to the necessity of her doing something for her own living, feeling that at any moment he might be taken from her and that then she would be utterly unprovided for. Therefore he had applied to the head of the establishment for which he worked, and by whom he was much respected, and Kate was at once engaged in the cashier's department, where she worked in company with half a dozen other young men and women somewhat older than herself.

For a year things went smoothly. Bartram's health appeared to improve, and with his daughter's small earnings added to his own, he had been

enabled to lay by a little money. This peaceful condition, however, was not destined to last long. On one never-to-be-forgotten morning, George Bartram was summoned to the presence of the head of the house by whom they were both employed. The poor man stopped short when he entered the private office, for there he found his daughter Kate, with a face of ghastly whiteness, two of the cashiers—a young man and a young woman—and the master himself. On seeing her father, Kate rose, and tottering to him threw her arms round his neck, and clung sobbing to him; but she seemed unable to speak, and it was from the master's lips that Bartram heard the miserable truth.

It appeared, for some little time past there had been discrepancies in the cash accounts, and from secret investigations which had been made, it seemed no longer possible to doubt that Kate Bartram had been to blame in the matter. The two other cashiers who were present had been the means of throwing light upon this grievous matter, but they had answered the questions which had been put to them so reluctantly, and had made such evident

efforts to soften the injurious facts they had to tell, that Bartram's unfortunate daughter had destroyed her last chance of forgiveness, when, with flashing eyes and crimson cheeks, she had turned upon her traducers, and had boldly accused them of having committed the theft themselves, and of conspiring together to make her the scapegoat of their crime.

Kate was dismissed from her situation then and there, but for her father's sake, as the amount that had been abstracted was not large, she was not prosecuted; nor would the head of the firm allow Bartram to break an agreement he had made a short time previously, to work for no one else for two years.

Bartram did not for an instant believe in his daughter's guilt, but he saw that it would be useless to fight the matter. Kate's angry attack on the two other cashiers had weakened her case terribly, for there seemed no particle of evidence to support what she had said, and by that act of imprudence she had hardened the heart of her employer. It was obviously impossible, however, for the girl to remain in Melbourne after the disgrace which had

fallen upon her, which was still further emphasized by the fact that her two traducers were taken into such high favour by the head of the firm that they were able to marry on the strength of it, and under these painful circumstances Bartram applied for assistance to an elder sister of his who lived in London and was a childless widow, supposed to be very comfortably off.

To this relation he proposed to send his broken-hearted daughter, entreating her to let the girl live with her until such time as, having worked out his two years' engagement in Melbourne, he would be able to rejoin them. Bartram's sister agreed to this at once, and without further delay the weeping girl bade her father farewell, and set out on her travels, taking with her the small sum which remained out of their joint savings, after her passage and outfit had been paid for.

For a year the desolate father worked on, receiving each mail a letter from Kate, which for his sake she tried to make as cheerful as possible; but Bartram could not recover the shock he had sustained, and so utterly miserable was he that a

circumstance which happened when he had been separated from Kate for twelve months, scarcely roused him from the melancholy apathy into which he had fallen.

Hubert Mallet and his young wife, the cashiers who had benefited so largely by Kate's misfortune, suddenly disappeared from Melbourne, and it was then found that there was a very heavy deficiency in the cash accounts which Mallet had managed almost entirely for the last six months. In the reaction of public opinion which set in after the discovery of this fraud, Kate might well have returned to the land of her birth ; but Bartram felt that unless her innocence could be positively established, he would not let her come back to dwell among those who had thought her capable of theft, and although the inference was now strongly in her favour, still, logically speaking, the fact of others having in their turn committed a crime, did not prove her to be guiltless.

For another nine months he toiled on, and then he received news from England which caused him the greatest anxiety. His sister had died suddenly,

and it was then discovered that the means she left were scarcely sufficient to cover her debts. Every thing had had to be sold at once, and Kate's distracted father knew that even before her letter reached him she would have been thrown upon her own resources, and, so far as he was aware, was now friendless in the great city.

In an agony of alarm on her account, Bartram went to his employer's and begged them to pay him what was owing him and to cancel his engagement; but it happened that the clever workman was employed at this particular time upon a suite of inlaid furniture which was to represent the firm at a colonial exhibition, and although his chief did not absolutely decline his urgent request, he told the agitated man that he must have a few hours to think the matter over. This indecision cost Bartram dear, his naturally delicate constitution broke down under the strain, and before morning he was in a high fever, incapable of moving, his whole frame racked with the pangs of rheumatic fever.

For three months he lay there a helpless cripple, and the first day he was able to leave his bed a

packet of letters were put into his hands ; these were from Kate, to whom the nurse had written from time to time, but of whom the poor fevered man was only allowed the shortest possible intelligence.

“And now you can guess, sir,” Bartram murmured, at the close of his long recital, “what this accident means to me ; when I came on board after paying the expenses of my illness and my passage, I had only a couple of pounds left. My girl is poor, terribly poor I’m sure ; she is actually trying to support herself by wood-carving—she used to amuse herself by carving in the old days—and now I’m going to be a burden on her.”

“But not for long, Bartram,” Jack replied, consolingly ; “come, don’t lose heart, man, there are harder troubles than yours, if you only knew it, and you cannot doubt but that your daughter will be happier with you by her side, even if you cannot work for a time ; your foot will be better soon, however, don’t you fear ; the surgeon gave a good report of it this morning, and now, in order that we may push matters on, sit up, there’s a good

fellow ; I've the bucket of sea-water here, and into that your ankle goes without another moment's loss of time."

Before the tedious voyage came to an end, Jack and the invalid had struck up a steady friendship, which was none the less sincere because the younger man did not in his turn confide the exact nature of his trouble to Bartram. Bartram knew that his friend John Thornton was come to England in quest of some one who was very dear to him, but whether it was a man or a woman, or what station of life the missing person occupied, he had no idea. He asked no questions, however, appearing perfectly to understand that it was from no ungracious feeling that his devoted and untiring nurse remained silent ; nor did he fail to appreciate to the full Jack's unselfishness, when, on arriving at the wharf, he insisted on hiring out of his own scanty means, a cab, and himself conveying the poor lame man to his home.

Reaching the house, Jack completed his good work by carrying Bartram up the interminable flights of stairs, and then having given him into his

pale-faced young daughter's care, he bade them a hasty adieu, promising to come and see them very shortly.

Outside he stopped a moment.

"I have done my duty," he muttered, with a sigh; "now I can begin my search. Oh, Ruth! Ruth! Heaven help me—my heart is breaking without you!"

The *Stirling Castle* reached the wharf at six o'clock in the morning, and at ten Jack entered the gates of 'The Lodge.'

END OF VOLUME II.

A
CRUEL DILEMMA

BY
MARY H. TENNYSON

AUTHOR OF
"LOVE WILL FIND OUT THE WAY," "FRIEND PERDITUS,"
"PAID IN FULL," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

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A CRUEL DILEMMA.



CHAPTER I.

AT half-past seven on the October morning of the *Stirling Castle's* arrival at her long-delayed goal, there was great commotion, excitement, and alarm, at 'The Lodge.'

Sir Richard Forrest, who had been a decided invalid since his daughter's flight, had a third serious attack—so serious indeed was it, that Lady Forrest, running out of her room to summon assistance, showed a face almost as white as the cashmere dressing-gown which she had wrapped hastily round her slim figure. On the threshold she was met by Jane Hunter.

The woman's countenance was even more forbidding than usual, and there was an eager questioning glitter in her eyes, to which Arabella answered at once.

"He is very ill," she muttered, avoiding the other's cruel glance; "call Mr. Mackintyre; tell him I might want him at any minute, and send for Dr. Saunders and Bertie."

Jane hesitated a moment, and then she asked grimly,—

"Is that safe?"

"Is what safe?" Arabella rejoined, impatiently.

"Sending for Dr. Saunders."

Wringing her hands together in an effort to control the nervous trembling which shook her whole frame, Lady Forrest replied hoarsely,—

"It is absolutely necessary, you must know that, Jane. Tell Tom to saddle a horse and ride as quickly as possible; let him go to Dr. Saunders first, and then on to Bertie. Bertie can come back on the horse. I shall go mad unless I have somebody to speak to; you haven't a grain of sympathy for any one."

Jane smiled sardonically, and shrugged her gaunt shoulders.

"Upon my word, Belle," she said, "you are a queer creature; I really can't see that you have much claim on anybody's sympathy."

"I have on Bertie's," Lady Forrest continued, feverishly; "what I am doing is mainly for him. He proposed it, you know he did, Jane, and I could not refuse him anything. He ought not to leave me so much; when he is here I can bear anything, but to be alone, oh, it is awful!"

In great alarm Jane laid her heavy hand upon the wretched woman's shoulder.

"Take care what you are about, Belle," she whispered, harshly; "don't begin to pity yourself, or it's all up with the three of us. As for Bertie's leaving you more to yourself than he did, you know that was positively necessary—the old man was getting jealous of him. Don't be unreasonable, but get the business over as quickly as you can, that is my advice. Your nerves are beginning to give way; well, by-and-by you can indulge in a regular illness, if you like, and Bertie and I will nurse

you; but just now you mustn't think of yourself, Lady Forrest."

Within half an hour Herbert Westall arrived at 'The Lodge,' and was shown at once to Lady Forrest's boudoir. She was lying upon the sofa, and though there was a bright fire in the grate, she was still shivering nervously. But Herbert Westall showed no interest whatever in her condition, as with an evil gleam in his eyes he hastened to her side.

"Well?" he asked, in breathless eagerness.

"He is very bad!" she faltered, catching Westall's hand, and holding it fast in her clammy fingers. "I could not stay any longer with him—he is terribly bad, Bertie."

"You've told me that before," he responded, with incredible coolness; "the question is, is he bad enough this time?"

"Bad enough?" she gasped, hiding her eyes against his hand.

With an irritable gesture Herbert Westall shook her off, and walking to the fireplace began kicking savagely at the blazing coals.

"You know what I mean, Belle, you don't want me to speak more plainly, I suppose. I tell you my patience is getting exhausted. Why did you go in for the business at all if you meant to turn funky?"

Rising, Lady Forrest crossed the room, and going to him leant wearily against the mantel.

"Don't begin to scold me, Bertie," she said, "I can't bear it; another feather's weight would send me into a fit of hysterics, and that is not advisable, I can tell you. I might say what would ruin us all, if I lost control over myself. Be a little gentle with me for your own sake, until all this is over. After that," she continued, bitterly, "you can punish me for my dilatory conduct with perfect safety to yourself."

"Oh, hang it all, Belle!" the man replied, his swarthy cheek flushing a little, "you mustn't take what I say to heart; you know I was never a good temper, and I am as dull as ditch-water; you see, the old fellow's having turned rusty makes it doubly bad for me; at any rate I used to be able to see you every day if I chose."

"Yes, I know all that," the other responded faintly, "but the thing must be done gradually."

"That's all very well," Herbert Westall continued impatiently; "but it's pretty nearly three months since the girl was disposed of, and we are exactly in the same position."

Arabella shivered again.

"This is the third attack he has had," she remarked ominously; "Dr. Saunders says he gets weaker every time."

Herbert Westall's mouth widened into a brutal smile.

"Saunders says so, does he? Well, I will admit, my dear, we are lucky in one thing. Saunders is about as stupid and self-conceited an old codger as I ever met. I hope to goodness he won't want to call in another opinion."

"I think not," Arabella answered, more composedly; "he knows that both Sir Richard and I have implicit confidence in him. You see," she continued with a little sneer, "he understands my husband's digestion, or rather his want of digestion, so thoroughly."

For a minute or two Herbert Westall sat silent, biting his nails and frowning heavily, and then he placed his arm round his cousin, and bending his head kissed her cheek.

“You mustn’t take offence, Belle,” he whispered; “you know all the time how fond I am of you, little woman. Manage the business your own way you have a far better head for planning than I have. Only let’s have it all settled before the end of the year. By-the-bye, I want some money.”

Considering the horrible brutality of the man, and her complete perception of his character, it was extraordinary to see how his cold caress soothed and comforted his miserable accomplice. The colour came into her white face, and she even smiled, as going to her writing-table she unlocked it and took out a pocket-book, from which she extracted four crisp bank-notes.

“There are twenty pounds,” she said, handing the notes to her cousin; “be careful of them, Bertie; it is only the middle of October yet, and I can give you no more until Christmas. That ought to be enough though for pocket-money for a couple of

months, and I shall be able to settle for your board and lodging and any other bills then."

Herbert Westall took the money without a word of thanks.

"It will be an awfully tight fit, Belle," he grumbled; "for a man in my position must play cards and billiards, unless he takes to drink altogether, and I daren't get drunk any more than you dare get hysterical. Can't you manage another fiver?"

"I can't really."

"Then how about Jane?"

"Jane hasn't anything, you know that perfectly well. I've paid you her wages regularly ever since she's been here, and what she had when she came, you've had. You must make that do, Bertie, until Christmas, for I cannot give you another farthing."

"You mean you won't," Westall went on peevishly; "you could let me have twice as much if you would only accept a larger allowance from Sir Richard."

With a murmur of impatience Arabella re-locked her writing-table, and going to the glass began to

arrange her golden hair in a becomingly untidy fashion.

“You are very trying this morning, my dear,” she said with piquante insolence. “You are a little dense at the best of times, but never mind, you suit me, for a wonder. I shouldn’t care to have to look up to any man, I prefer a sense of my own superiority, and when I am with you I can revel in that to any extent. Look here, we have a good many years before us which we may enjoy if you will only leave me alone now. As for your present comfort, it really is not an important matter, and to speak plainly I wish that you should suffer while I suffer. I could, as you say, get fifty or even a hundred pounds from Sir Richard with the greatest ease; in fact he offered it to me last night through Mr. Mackintyre, who came down on business yesterday afternoon, and is here now; but I declined it, saying I had already more money than I wanted, and that I would not take advantage of my husband’s generosity.”

With an angry oath Herbert Westall interrupted her.

“ You didn’t think of me, at any rate.”

“ Oh, yes I did,” she answered, smiling up at his savage face, and hooking her hand into his arm; “ I thought of myself, my dear, and therefore indirectly I thought of you. I know that in the time to come Mr. Mackintyre will not forget my disinterested conduct, nor the compliments he paid me on it. The lawyer will be a very useful friend to me, and possibly to you, you cross-patch, some day. At any rate, he is fully aware that I am not at all grasping in the matter of money. Why, don’t you see, you foolish fellow, that if my allowance were increased I couldn’t account for the spending of it; and with regard to the matter hanging fire and being longer about than you expected, now you are in a better temper I will satisfy you so far as this. Mackintyre’s business with my husband last night makes things a great deal easier for us, and,” she continued with another involuntary shudder, “ is the reason Sir Richard is so much worse again to-day.”

“ How do you mean?” her cousin inquired eagerly.

“From something my husband said,” Arabella whispered, recovering herself quickly, “I gathered he was going to alter his will again; in fact, I had been working quietly for some little time to influence him in that direction; and, in order to lull suspicion afterwards, I had even suggested that, notwithstanding her faulty conduct, Ruth should still inherit an equal share of her father’s property.”

Westall started violently.

“What the devil do you mean, Belle?” he cried with another oath. “What have we been toiling for all this time, if that is to be the end of it?”

“It won’t be the end of it, now,” Arabella replied soothingly; “but I can assure you the business has taxed my ingenuity severely. Bertie, Bertie, I can’t get it into your thick head that we must avoid investigation afterwards. Can’t you understand it would be better to wait a year even, if necessary, in order that our conduct should appear irreproachable subsequently? Ah, there is the breakfast gong, I can’t explain the matter more fully now; but you may depend on this, things are shaping as well as possible for us. I must go down

and give Mr. Mackintyre his tea. Saunders is a long while coming, isn't he?"

"He is here," Westall replied shortly.

"Here! How do you know?"

"I heard him go into the room ten minutes ago."

"And you didn't tell me!" Arabella cried, angrily. "Bertie, you are an idiot! Of course I ought to have been found by my husband's bed side. Well, remember I have been taken faint in here, and you wouldn't let me go to him."

"Very well," Westall replied coolly, "you look like a ghost, so that's all right."

Mr. Mackintyre the lawyer and Dr. Saunders stood together by the the breakfast-table when the agitated little lady entered, her golden hair floating round her face in picturesque disorder, and her violet eyes distended in a piteous appeal to their sympathies.

"Doctor," she cried, "I did not know you were here; my cousin would not let them tell me."

"And I was quite right, was I not, Dr.

Saunders?" Westall broke in. "Lady Forrest has been much upset by the shock of Sir Richard's attack—I was afraid of her breaking down altogether."

The doctor, a benevolent, rather weak-looking old gentleman, with spectacles and a very bald head, hastened to assure the young man that in his opinion he had been more than justified in interfering to prevent Lady Forrest's already sorely tried strength being too severely taxed.

"Ah, doctor," Lady Forrest interrupted, impatiently, "you mustn't think of me now; pray tell me how Sir Richard is."

"I hope and think he is a little better," Dr. Saunders replied, gently. "The paroxysm seems to have passed, and now all he wants is quiet and your attention."

"Then you don't consider his condition dangerous?" the lady queried, anxiously.

"Well, as to that," the doctor continued, shaking his head wisely, "we can't disguise the fact that Sir Richard's health has always been most unsatisfactory, but we must not look upon the gloomy side

of the matter; let us hope for the best—he has wonderful power of vitality, which is in his favour; and, moreover, I venture to think I understand his constitution completely.”

With a patient sigh and a sad face Lady Forrest invited the gentlemen to sit down to the table, and then, having poured out their tea, begged them to excuse her, saying she had no appetite and could not stay longer away from her husband.

No persuasions, however, could induce Herbert Westall to join the others at their meal.

“I am off my feed altogether,” he said; “my cousin’s distress quite alarmed me. I’ll go out and smoke a cigar in the garden, then I shall be out of the way, and yet within call in case I am wanted.”

But although the young man spoke civilly enough, there was a very savage frown on his face, as, thrusting his hands deep into his pockets, he began to stride up and down the long terrace, puffing at his cigar.

“It’s a horrid chilly day,” he muttered, “and I’m as seedy as a dog this morning; but anything’s

better than sitting in there with those two old fogeys ; I don't mind Saunders, he's a fool ; but Mackintyre isn't so easy to impose upon—in fact, I hate all lawyers ; I'd almost as soon breakfast with a detective."

Left to themselves, the two professional men attacked their breakfast heartily, Lady Forrest, her beauty, her devotion to her sick husband, the noble generosity of her efforts to induce him to seek for and forgive the absent daughter, and above all the charm of her manner, forming the subject of their conversation.

"Yes," said Mackintyre at length, "there's no question about it, Sir Richard has been fortunate in his second wife."

"And in his first too," Saunders interrupted ; "the first Lady Forrest was a most delightful person. It's queer, isn't it, how old Dick Forrest managed to fascinate two such women ? So far as I can see, he's the last man in the world that a woman would find attractive, but there must be something about him that I can't appreciate ; for neither of his wives can be accused of marrying him for his money, the

first had plenty of her own, which, unfortunately for Ruth, wasn't settled on her; and, as for the second, so far as I can understand, she doesn't seem at all avaricious."

"On the contrary," Mackintyre replied warmly, "she is singularly indifferent about money. She expressed herself strongly on the subject of settlements before her marriage, and I must say I never heard a more peculiar, and what seemed to me a more modest argument put forward."

"What was that?" Dr. Saunders inquired, with much interest.

"I recollect her words even, and how lovely she looked at the time, she made such an impression upon me," Mackintyre continued. "'I will have no money settled on me,' she said; 'I have perfect faith in Sir Richard Forrest. If I do my duty by him, he will by me, I am sure. Sir Richard thinks very highly of me, I am proud to say. I hope he may continue to do so; but I cannot bear he should do anything now which he might regret afterwards.'"

"But what did Westall say to that?" Dr.

Saunders asked. "I suppose he looked after his cousin's interests?"

"Oh, he wasn't at all pleased," Mackintyre replied with a laugh; "but he couldn't hold out against her any more than the rest of us. If he knew as much as I do now, however, he would admit that what we all thought was almost foolishly generous in the pretty little creature was about the wisest thing she could possibly have done."

"Indeed?" cried the Doctor, his eyes shining with curiosity; "may I ask what you mean, without being unduly inquisitive?"

"Well it mustn't go any further," the other answered, lowering his voice; "but under the influence of her charming self-abnegation, Sir Richard divided his money equally between her and his daughter, fifty thousand pounds each, which, after all, perhaps wasn't quite the correct thing, considering that Ruth's mother's fortune amounted to forty thousand pounds. That's where it undoubtedly comes very hard upon Ruth, for, as Lady Forrest represented to Sir Richard only yesterday, if he chooses to cut his daughter out of his will so far

as his own money is concerned, she certainly ought to inherit her mother's fortune, whether she has offended her father or not; but the old man has the power in his hands, and every word his wife says makes him more obstinate, I do believe. He had this conversation with her in the afternoon, and he telegraphed for me at once, and now, though Lady Forrest doesn't know it, the girl's position is worse than ever."

"How's that?"

"Why the old fellow was perfectly implacable yesterday evening; it appears his wife had put forward as an argument why he should do himself greater justice in making his will; that, after all, he could not prevent his daughter's getting her mother's money, since she should herself feel it a duty to make restitution to Ruth directly the fortune came into her possession."

"Charming!" cried the Doctor, enthusiastically: "and the effect of that?"

"Well, the effect of that," Mackintyre whispered, "was really disastrous, so far as Ruth goes. Lady Forrest spoke quite innocently and warmly in her

step-daughter's interests, but the result has been very unfortunate, I must admit. Sir Richard made a fresh will last night, and nothing I could say could prevent him leaving the whole of his fortune to his wife, *on condition* that she did not share any portion of it with his offending daughter. The only thing we can hope is that he will come to see the cruelty of this after a time; but I daren't tell his wife about it, as I can see, although she is naturally perfectly unaware of it, that every word she says in Ruth's favour makes the old man more unreasonable. By-the-bye, what's your real opinion of his condition, Saunders?"

"Very bad indeed, very, very bad!" the other replied with a gloomy shake of his head. "Sir Richard has always had a wretched constitution, and considering that he has been a martyr to chronic dyspepsia of a very serious form for five-and-thirty years, to my certain knowledge, this condition is only what might be expected after any particular shock to the system. He has never recovered his daughter's elopement, and he never will. You know he fainted when he heard the news, and

then pulled himself together sufficiently to go out and institute inquiries about her, and to send for you and make his will, but the excitement only kept him up as long as that. You hadn't left the house two hours when the re-action set in, and I found him in an awful state with the first of these gastric attacks. He has had two seizures since, and every time he gets weaker. There is really nothing to be done, however, except to be careful what he eats and drinks. Knowing him as well as I do, it is only curious to me that he has lasted so long. In fact, I really consider that he is being kept alive now mainly through his wife's affectionate devotion; though, of course, seeing how attached she is to him, I don't tell her that."

Here the old Doctor came to a sudden stop, for at this juncture Lady Forrest re-entered the room, having removed her dressing-gown, and assumed a morning costume of a delicate heliotrope shade, which made the interesting pallor of her face more noticeable than ever.

"Sir Richard has fallen asleep," she said,

softly, "so I have left Jane to watch him, and have come down to see if you have everything you want, gentlemen."

"And you've come down to have a little breakfast yourself, I hope," the Doctor said, rising fussily and beaming at her. "Now, my dear lady, you mustn't shake that pretty head of yours at me, but you must be amenable to orders, and sit down and have something to eat and drink at once. Oh come, come, don't set up a will of your own, let Sir Richard monopolize the obstinacy of the whole household. This is a case in which I am bound to exert my authority. Come now, take this cup of tea, my dear, you mustn't lose heart so soon, that will never do. Why, Sir Richard has been ill before, and we have pulled him through, eh?"

Arabella took the cup of tea which the old man handed to her, while Mr. Mackintyre bestirred himself to butter for her a thin slice of toast. With an evident effort, murmuring her thanks in a trembling tone, she ate a small portion and swallowed a mouthful of the tea, and then shading her eyes with her hand, she faltered,—

“You are very kind to me both of you, but I cannot help feeling dreadfully depressed; my poor husband has been ill before, I know, but he is worse than usual this time, is he not?”

Dr. Saunders hesitated, and Arabella continued,—

“Tell me the truth, Doctor, please.”

“Well, I can’t say positively that he is worse, my dear lady,” the old man responded, “but his weakness is certainly alarming. Everything has been done that could have been done, however, I am sure; still, if it would be any comfort to you to have another opinion, don’t hesitate to say so for fear of hurting my feelings.”

With an irrepressible start, which caused the cup and saucer she held to clatter so loudly that she was obliged to place it hastily on the table, Arabella’s pale face flushed vividly, but in an instant she regained her composure, and looking appealingly at the lawyer said softly,—

“What do you think, Mr. Mackintyre? Pray give me your advice, I feel so helpless in matters where I cannot consult my husband. I have myself

perfect confidence in Dr. Saunders, I feel that he must understand Sir Richard's sad condition better than any stranger, but I would not willingly leave a chance untried. Tell me what you think, I will be guided by you entirely. You will forgive me, will you not," she continued sweetly, "for burdening you with the responsibility of advising me in this matter? but it is such a comfort to me to know that I can rely upon you absolutely. You and Dr. Saunders between you have enabled me to bear up under this trouble. If it had not been for your kindness, indeed, I don't know what would have become of me."

Quite touched by her earnestness, the two gentlemen looked at the pathetic winning face, without attempting to suppress the warm admiration and sympathy that shone in theirs.

"You overrate my ability, though not my desire to be of service to you, Lady Forrest," the lawyer said, "and though it flatters me that you should appeal to me for my advice, you, of course, do not forget that you have another friend, your cousin. Have you spoken to him on this subject?"

“Ah, my cousin Bertie, of course,” the lady cried, with a faint smile. “I have not asked him, certainly, but I am afraid I scarcely appreciate his advice. I am very tenderly attached to him, however; as you know, his parents stood in the place of mine, and Bertie and I grew up together from little children. Perhaps that is the reason I have not accustomed myself to ask his opinion on serious matters. Let us call him now, though, by all means.”

Going to the window Mr. Mackintyre beckoned to the young man, who was walking slowly up and down on the terrace; with a face of eager interest, he came quickly into the room.

“How is he now, Belle?” he asked, endeavouring to render his harsh voice kind and gentle.

“More quiet, and asleep, thank you, cousin,” she murmured, softly, “but we want your advice, Bertie: these kind friends and I were discussing the advisability of having another opinion on my poor husband’s case.”

Westall’s hand went up to his mouth quickly, a habit of his when at all agitated, and Lady Forrest,

to give him time, continued, turning to the lawyer, "But let us hear what you think first, Mr. Mackintyre?"

"Well," he replied, "I see no possible objection to it, if it would be any comfort to you; though, mind you, I fear it would be attended with no beneficial result, for, as you say, our old friend Saunders here understands the patient's constitution better than any one else. But what have you to say on this subject, Mr. Westall?"

"I think it is a good notion," Westall responded, speaking slowly and hoarsely, and staring at the pattern of the carpet; "but it seems to me there is one objection to it."

"And what is that?"

"Why, mightn't it frighten Sir Richard if another opinion were called in? It would me, I know, if I were in his position. I should fancy everybody thought me in an awfully bad way. It wouldn't do him any good, I suppose, to get a shock of that kind?"

"Certainly not," replied Dr. Saunders, promptly; "any shock should be carefully avoided, it might prove most dangerous."

"Then there is the difficulty, you see," Westall continued, heavily.

Mr. Mackintyre nodded sharply.

"Mr. Westall is right," he said; "we mustn't run any risk, especially when we feel that there is no necessity for it. I should let things go on as they are, Lady Forrest, if I were you, and I shouldn't worry more than I could help."

Lady Forrest smiled pathetically and gratefully at the kindly old lawyer.

"And that is your opinion too, Bertie?" she said, softly.

"Yes, it is, taking all the difficulties into consideration," he replied, turning on his heel and walking towards the grate to warm his chilled fingers.

Before he had half crossed the room, however, he stopped, and once again he covered his mouth with his hand, and with an effort which was perfectly apparent to his watchful accomplice, he lifted his furtive eyes and looked the Doctor in the face.

"There is one thing which has just struck me," he said, still speaking in the same hoarse, thick tones.

“And what is that ?” Dr. Saunders asked encouragingly. He did not like Herbert Westall, nobody did, but the old Doctor, whose principal weakness was his professional vanity, had been pleased when the usually slow-witted young man had given them so good a reason for not calling in a second opinion. “Come, don’t hesitate, Mr. Westall ; in a multitude of councillors, you know, there is wisdom.”

“I am hesitating,” replied Westall, slowly, “because I am afraid I may offend you, and I don’t want to do that. I can’t put things so pleasantly as my cousin can, you know.”

“That is not to be expected of you or any other man,” Dr. Saunders said, gallantly ; “but you needn’t be afraid of offending me, I am not irritable.”

“This is an awkward thing to say, though,” Westall went on, while his cousin listened attentively, wondering what was coming ; “are you quite certain you really understand what is the matter with Sir Richard ?”

The Doctor’s start of surprise was so marked, no one noticed the quiver that ran through the little

lady's whole figure at this utterly unexpected and dangerous question.

"My dear sir," Dr. Saunders cried, warmly, "that is indeed an awkward remark. I cannot imagine that you mean to be offensive, but still——"

"I told you you wouldn't be pleased," Westall interrupted; "but I felt bound to speak in my cousin's interests. It would be such an awful thing for her to have any fuss afterwards, in case anything happened."

"Fuss afterwards; I don't understand you," the aggrieved old Doctor exclaimed.

"Why I mean a *post mortem*, or a coroner's inquest, or something of that kind," Westall went on, doggedly, with a momentary glance at his cousin's blanched face.

"A *post mortem*! A coroner's inquest! Why on earth should it be necessary to have anything of the sort?"

"I thought if a man died of a complaint that wasn't clearly understood there was obliged to be either one or the other," Westall replied.

"But who says Sir Richard's complaint is not

clearly understood?" Dr. Saunders cried angrily.

"Do you mean to insult me, sir?"

"Oh no, no, Doctor, I am sure he doesn't," Lady Forrest cried, laying her little hand soothingly on the incensed man's arm. "No friend of mine would say a word to hurt your feelings. Pray, Bertie, explain what you mean; I cannot bear Dr. Saunders should think any one belonging to me was unappreciative of his great skill and kindness."

"I knew I should make a muddle of it," Westall rejoined, in pretended annoyance. "I don't doubt Dr. Saunders' skill; I only meant, can he give a name to Sir Richard's complaint?"

"Can I give it a name? of course I can, a dozen names, which you wouldn't understand," the old man answered hotly.

"Ah, that's all I meant," Westall continued, "and I am very sorry I didn't express myself better; what I wished to suggest was that if Dr. Saunders felt any doubt of the positive nature of the disease it would be better to run the risk of having another opinion, for in case of death—it's a ghastly thing to talk about, I know, but the poor

old gentleman will not die any the sooner on that account—in case of death there has to be a certificate, hasn't there?"

"Undoubtedly there has," Dr. Saunders answered irritably; "but there is no difficulty about that where a man has been attended by a properly qualified practitioner."

"And it is not necessary to have the opinion of a consulting physician then?" Westall persisted, with another momentary glance at his cousin, whose eyes were fixed upon him in almost open admiration.

"Not unless your own adviser is a fool," poor Dr. Saunders replied, almost beside himself with anger and wounded vanity. "You talk about consulting physicians as though they were a different order of being. I'd like you to understand, sir, that I admit the superiority of no consulting physician in the world over myself. The idea of a man of my position and experience not being supposed capable of signing the death certificate of a patient he has attended for five-and-thirty years. It's really monstrous!"

"I can only beg your pardon, Doctor," Westall

replied humbly. "I meant no disrespect; I was anxious to spare my cousin future anxiety, that was all."

But the old Doctor was not to be mollified in a minute, and Mackintyre and Lady Forrest were still engaged in soothing him down when a thundering double knock at the house door caused the assembled group to utter a simultaneous exclamation of surprise and dismay.

"Who can that be?" the lady faltered; "how annoying! It must have startled my poor husband from his sleep."

She went towards the door, but before she reached it it was thrown violently open, and a young man came hurriedly into the room. His face was pale and thin, a thick beard covered his chin, and his clothes were shabby and travel-stained, but notwithstanding the great alteration in him there was not one among them who did not recognize immediately in the haggard man the light-hearted Jack Rathbone, who bade them farewell only six months before.

CHAPTER II.

WITHOUT greeting either of the four persons assembled, Jack looked anxiously round the apartment, but not finding the one he sought, he turned to Lady Forrest, who, paler than ever, had retreated until she stood on the hearth-rug close to her cousin's side.

"Where is Sir Richard?" Jack demanded abruptly; "I must see him at once."

On encountering the young man's agitated gaze it seemed that Lady Forrest's courage failed her, for her fair cheek became crimson suddenly, and she caught at Westall's arm for support.

"Mr. Rathbone," she faltered, "I am surprised to see you, I thought you were some thousands of miles away, and I am sorry you should be looking so ill and worn."

Jack bowed, but did not take the outstretched hand ; for the first time he doubted the beautiful woman who looked so sympathetically at him.

“I am not ill,” he said shortly, “but I am terribly anxious, no doubt you all know why. I must see Sir Richard immediately.”

“You cannot do that, unfortunately,” the lady replied, “my husband is seriously ill.”

“If he is alive I must see him !” Jack cried violently. “I will take no denial, Lady Forrest. I will not leave this house without seeing Sir Richard.”

The matter was still being hotly argued, the agitated lady appealing to the doctor and the lawyer to help her to quiet the unreasonable intruder, when Jane Hunter suddenly appeared among them.

“Master has sent me down,” she said, addressing her mistress ; “he has heard Mr. Rathbone’s voice. He is very excited, and says if Mr. Rathbone doesn’t go up to him he will come down himself.”

Without waiting for another word the young man pushed by the silent group, who no longer

offered him any opposition, and rushing up the stairs, entered the darkened sick room, and closed the door carefully behind him.

For an hour or more Jack remained shut up with Sir Richard, but when he came out again his brave head was bowed, and he slunk past the lower rooms and out of the house as though he would have hidden himself if he could, even from the very daylight.

Wearily he dragged himself down the long drive, and as he went the autumn leaves fell thickly round him. Six months before, in the Spring season, Ruth had walked with him down this same avenue, and on that bitter day of parting he had thought that no sorrow could equal the grief which wrung his heart then, but now the falling leaves reminded him that the sweet spring-time of his life was gone for ever, that his hopes were withered and dead, and nothing but the dreary winter stretched before him.

With a hard tearless sob he stopped just before he quitted the grounds, and looked back at the house where his happiest hours had been spent.

“Good-bye,” he muttered, “I shall never come

here again ; the poor old man will be at rest soon. She has broken his heart as well as mine, but he is luckier than I am, for his sorrow and shame will kill him."

He walked forward, but in a few minutes he came to another stand.

"I will see this Felix Dent," he thought, his eyes glittering dangerously. "I am mad, perhaps, to trust myself with him, but I must see him ; I must hear all that I can force from him ; even the certainty of knowing that she is happy with him would be better than this awful ignorance."

Quickening his pace, without another moment of hesitation, with a stern expression of despair in his face, the unhappy lover pursued his way to the railway station, and by the time he arrived at Waterloo he had succeeded in piecing together in his mind all that the suffering old Baronet had been able to tell him concerning the bitterly hated Felix Dent.

Sir Richard Forrest, however, knew nothing of Dent's present way of living, and very little of his past. Soon after the young man was introduced at

“The Lodge” by Herbert Westall, the Baronet learnt that he had been a clerk in a private bank in Finch Street, City, but at the time Ruth left her home with him Sir Richard believed Dent had been out of employment. Therefore, he told Jack, he had come to the conclusion Dent must be possessed of private means of which both he and Westall were ignorant, for Ruth could not have had more than a small amount of her own when she took the fatal step which had brought ignominy upon an honourable name.

But even with this very slight clue to aid him, Jack had no doubt of being able to trace his enemy, and feeling perfectly confident on this point, he experienced no surprise when, on making inquiries at the first private bank he came to in Finch Street, he was told that Mr. Dent had returned to his desk there about the middle of August, after an absence of over six months, but was at that moment out at lunch.

Jack considered a moment, and then endeavouring to suppress all signs of the anxiety he felt, he inquired of the commissionaire who stood at the

door of the bank if he could direct him to the place where Mr. Dent lunched.

"I wish to speak with him on private business," he explained, "and I could do so more easily there than here."

"That's true, sir," the man replied; "talking's not allowed in the office. Mr. Dent lunches where most of our gents do, that's at Tomasso's restaurant. Do you know it?"

Jack shook his head.

"Take the second turning to your right, sir, and you will see it almost opposite you on the left-hand side of the street."

With a hasty murmur of thanks, Jack strode off, but he had not gone a dozen yards before a sudden thought struck him, and he returned quickly to the commissionaire.

"There's another thing I want you to do for me," he said in some confusion: "I don't know Mr. Dent personally, would you mind describing him to me? I'd rather not have to ask the waiter at the restaurant; besides, they might not know him there by name."

"That's more than likely," replied the man, who, being evidently of a very loquacious nature, was only too glad to relieve the monotony of his existence by a chat; "for Mr. Dent's as silent a young man now as you ever come across. He was very different in the old days; a regular young rattler he was, up to all sorts of fun, but he's only taken to going to Tomasso's since the place he used to lunch at was burnt down two months ago."

"And so Mr. Dent's altered lately, you think?" Jack said, quietly.

"Altered! why, if it wasn't for his flaxen hair and moustache and eyebrows, his best friend would hardly know him. It's my belief, sir, as he went through a lot of trouble while he was away from here; but that's not what you wanted to ask me, is it? You can't mistake Mr. Felix Dent, because of his light hair. I never see such hair except on the head of a new born babe, and I hear the other gents say as he always sits at the same table quite mum-chance, right away at the back in a corner by himself."

Bestowing upon the garrulous commissionaire a substantial gratuity, which was quite extravagantly large considering his very slender resources, Jack walked away again, and in less than two minutes pushed open the elaborate stained-glass door of Tomasso's Italian restaurant ; while the commissionaire, pocketing the coin he had received, ruffled his brow thoughtfully.

“ That chap don't look as if he had many half-sovereigns to spare,” he mused ; “ I've had a deal of experience in my day and seen as much of life, take it all together, as most men of my age, and if that young fellow ain't in low water I'm mistaken. He's not the cut of one of them eccentrics as wears a shabby coat while their pockets are full of gold. I wonder what he wants with that young Dent ? Well, he's got as honest a face as one would wish to see, and he's a handsome chap, too, for all he's not so neat as he might be, and hasn't been to the barber's lately. I expect he's mixed up with that worry of Dent's, whatever it is ; for though he tried to hide it, I could see trouble shining in his eyes as plain as I ever saw it anywhere. Hang me if I'm not sorry I

took his tip. He'll want that money, or I'm much mistaken. Still, it's difficult to refuse a gent who's a real gent, and who has evidently been used to chuck his money about freely. I don't think it would do to offer it him back; he looks as if he'd got a spice of the devil in him, and a fellow as has lost an arm ought to be careful how he rubs them as has two and high spirits the wrong way."

Which comforting reflection speedily removed the man's qualms of conscience, and he reseated himself on his high stool in the doorway, and was soon immersed in the columns of the sporting paper which had been bestowed upon him in the morning by a horsy young gentleman who dabbled in betting, and who had been mainly responsible for the unfortunate Felix Dent's backsliding in the past, and was therefore the indirect cause of all the troubles that lay so heavily upon the shoulders of Ruth and Jack; for had Felix Dent not been open to temptation in consequence of his dishonesty, the conspiracy could not have been carried out in anything like a complete manner.

Jack had to thread his way past a dozen small tables, at which were seated a crowd of hungry, loud-talking young City men, before he discovered the object of his quest; but when his glance fell upon Felix Dent he stopped involuntarily, and in spite of himself the rage which had burnt so fiercely in his breast began to cool.

The commissionaire's description of his enemy, beyond the salient points which it was necessary for him to grasp in order that he might recognize him, had made very little impression upon Jack's perplexed brain, and therefore the sight of the forlorn figure, which expressed in every line the utmost depression of spirits, positively startled him. In thinking of Dent, he had always pictured him as a successful rival, who, in all probability, gloated over the misery of the poor defrauded lover; but when he saw the stooping, listless attitude, and the woebegone face, his heart grew softer. At any rate Felix Dent was not revelling in the possession of the treasure for which Jack's whole being seemed to cry out. He was unhappy; it was impossible to look at him and question that,

and though no doubt his unhappiness was well-deserved, Jack's misfortunes had not rendered him callous to the sufferings of another, even though that other had injured him beyond all power of atonement; and after gazing at the despondent young man fixedly for a minute, Jack found it possible even to pity him.

But in proportion as his anger cooled towards the one delinquent it increased towards Ruth. That she should have been led away by such a man as this, that one so weak should have been able to tempt her to be disloyal and undignified, filled Jack Rathbone's mind with contempt as well as indignation.

Felix Dent had finished eating, and was sitting with his heavy head supported by his hands, when he became aware that some one had stopped close to him, and raising his eyes, saw at his elbow a tall man of about his own age, who was looking down at him with so stern an expression that the miserable young fellow, who lived in a perpetual atmosphere of self-reproach and unavailing regret, shrank back uneasily in his chair, and then rising

hastily stretched out his hand for his hat which hung in a rack above his head.

But before he could move away from the table, the stranger laid his hand upon his arm, and clutched it so tightly that Dent with difficulty repressed the cry of alarm which his uneasy conscience almost forced from him.

“You are Felix Dent, I believe!” Jack Rathbone said, shortly. “I must speak to you at once; not here, in private; neither of us would wish our conversation to be overheard.”

Felix Dent caught his breath with a gasp, but one glance at his companion showed that he was not to be trifled with.

“There is a billiard-room upstairs,” he said, “there is seldom any one there just at this hour; shall we go up? I have to be back in a quarter of an hour, but I can spare you ten minutes.”

“You will have to spare me more than that, I expect,” Jack responded, grimly; “but lead the way now.”

With a beating heart Felix stumbled up the

stairs, the other following him closely. Who his inexorable companion could be, Dent had not the faintest notion, for though he had seen Jack's photograph and had heard Ruth describe him more than once, he did not recognize in this bearded, careworn man the cheery face of Ruth Forrest's absent lover.

CHAPTER III.

To a man with any weight upon his conscience every human being he comes in contact with is a possible accuser, and when Felix Dent at length turned and faced Jack, his fear increased to so great an extent that his knees began to shake under him, and he was obliged to wipe away the moisture that broke out upon his forehead.

There was something so pitiable in his aspect, that Jack felt constrained to turn his eyes away from the miserable man.

“You guess who I am,” he said, “I can see that; well, this interview is as painful to me as it is to you, let us get it over as quickly as possible; answer my questions frankly, and I will let you go.”

“What is it you want to know?” the other

stammered ; “ I will answer any questions, as far as I am able.”

“ Then, where is she ? ” Jack demanded, harshly. “ You know who I mean, tell me where she is ; I don’t wish to see her, the sight of her would break my heart, I believe ; but I must know where she is, and whether she is well — and — and — happy ? ”

Retreating from him, Felix Dent’s pale eyes dilated in a sudden access of terror.

“ Where is she ? I don’t know what you mean. Of whom are you speaking ? ”

“ Why, your wife, I suppose,” Jack replied bitterly.

“ My wife ! You must be mad ! I am not married, nor am I likely to be ! ”

With a suppressed cry, Jack advanced a step or two, and laid his hand roughly on the shrinking man’s shoulder.

“ You are not married ! ” he said, hoarsely, “ then you are a scoundrel, and I will thrash you like the cur you are ! ”

Breathing quickly, Felix Dent shook off the

heavy hand, and retreated again until there was a space of a few yards between them.

“On my soul,” he panted, “I don’t know what you mean. How have I injured you? Who are you?”

Pausing, Jack raised his frowning brows in surprise.

“You do not know me, then?”

The other shook his head, and wrung his hands together feebly.

“I am John Rathbone, who else can you have injured as you have injured me?”

The unhappy Felix Dent sank into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, groaned aloud,—

“Jack Rathbone! Heaven help me, it’s Jack Rathbone!”

For a minute or so there was silence between them, Felix keeping his face covered, and then the wretched young man looked up at his relentless judge, and faltered out,—

“Rathbone, God knows you have no reason to think me anything but a scoundrel; but tell

me one thing: why do you question me about her?"

With a start Jack clenched his brown fist, but restraining himself by a mighty effort, he answered,—

"Who else should I ask? If you have one decent trait in your composition, don't oblige me to enter into details. Tell me where she is, and why you have not married her?"

"You mean Miss Forrest, I suppose?"

Jack nodded, he could not speak, he seemed to be suffocating with anguish and rage.

"I cannot tell you where she is, for I do not know," the other answered, brokenly; "and as for marrying her, Heaven help me, I am not worthy even to look into her pure face!"

With a cry, Jack ran to him, and seizing him by the breast of his coat, shook him violently.

"What do you mean?" he asked, his eyes glittering with a gleam of hope. "For mercy's sake don't torture me like this. Her father told me she left her home with you? She gave up

father and friends for your sake. Speak, can't you? Speak, or I'll kill you!"

As pale as death, Felix Dent rose, and faced the infuriated man.

"If you did kill me," he said quietly, "it would be no more than I deserve, and I shouldn't regret it. If I had been less of a coward, or had not had my poor mother to think of, I should have ended my life long ago. But while you reproach me, remember this, you yourself are not blameless. Your misery comes of your want of faith. Do not make me responsible for that."

Without a word Jack dropped his arm, and retreated involuntarily, and there was something almost dignified in Felix Dent's white face as he continued,—

"You were engaged to Miss Forrest; she had honoured you with her love, and yet you dared to doubt her! Why, even I, miserable, degraded wretch that I am, am capable of doing her more justice than you are—you, the man that she loves! Hear me, Rathbone: I knew Ruth Forrest but a few weeks only, I will not say that I loved her, she is

as far removed from me as heaven is from earth, but I worshipped her ; she is my ideal of a woman ; beautiful, and yet unconscious of her own beauty ; clever, and yet modest ; and so gentle and kind that, even in the midst of her own heavy trouble, the trouble of losing you, she could still spare her pity and sympathy for one like me. But there is no need for me to love her, to trust her ; I know that she is as utterly incapable of falsehood in word or deed as she is of any other action that could reflect discredit on her, and I would sooner doubt the evidence of my own senses than question her faith and honour !”

Completely thunderstruck by this utterly unexpected burst of eloquence, and almost transported by the new hope that the words awoke in his heart, Jack caught Dent’s outstretched hand in his, and wrung it until the other winced in his strong grasp.

“For pity’s sake explain yourself !” he cried.
“Has Sir Richard deceived me ?”

“Sir Richard has been himself deceived !” the other murmured, hanging his head in bitter shame,

“Rathbone, when you hear the truth, you will see that you have done me no injustice, there is not a more despicable wretch than I in all the world.”

With many breaks, Felix Dent told his miserable story—the story of his appropriation of the bank money in the first instance, and then of Herbert Westall’s offer to save him from the effects of his crime if he would enter into a compact to carry out a certain matter which required delicate manipulation.

He was required, Dent explained, crimsoning with grief and mortification, to devote himself somewhat ostentatiously to Ruth; it was not desired that he should make love to her—in fact he was cautioned against doing so lest she should take offence; he was merely to talk and walk and ride with her on every possible occasion, the botany lessons being suggested as an easy means of bringing them together.

It seemed Herbert Westall had told Dent, when he originally mentioned the scheme to him, that his cousin, Lady Forrest, found the presence of her step-daughter a great discomfort; that she

was anxious, in fact, to get her out of the house, but that she did not wish to offend the old baronet by appearing to suggest the girl's leaving her home. In short, it was her object that Ruth should seem to have gone away of her own free will: and though the unhappy young man was unable at the time to understand how his accepting the singular position which was assigned to him could assist in the scheme, being assured by Westall that no particular harm could come to Ruth, even if she did take this step, beyond that of offending her father for a time, he in his utter misery, mainly for his poor old mother's sake, had accepted the conditions on which alone Westall consented to save him from prison.

For a time, Dent explained, although he knew himself to be in a false position, he was not altogether unhappy, for he admired and respected Ruth intensely, and he felt that under her sweet influence all that was good in his weak nature was being fostered, and that in the end he might even be able to rise out of the slough into which he had fallen and do some good work in the world; but presently

he began to perceive that Sir Richard Forrest's suspicions were being worked upon by the pair of unscrupulous cousins, and that on his account Ruth was getting rapidly into her father's disfavour. No expostulations, however, no prayers of his could move his callous employer, he was forced to go to the bitter end, on pain of having his crime exposed to the manager of the bank, by whom he had already been suspended as a punishment for inattention to business.

As Jack listened to the faltering voice, the hard lines round his mouth faded out, and the blue eyes began to shine with the old tender light; at that moment there was no room in his heart for anger against Herbert Westall, Felix Dent, or any one in the world. There was no perplexity even, there was no thought of sorrow. Presently he would unravel the mystery in which everything was shrouded; now he could think of nothing but this: Ruth loved him still! What mattered poverty and care, what mattered anything else to him, then? His darling was true to him, his had been the only falsehood, that of doubting her absolute loyalty and

honour. Well, for that fault he would make up in the future. She would recognize that his love for her had rendered his judgment feeble, and in her nobleness she would pity his weakness and forgive him.

For a few moments he sat silent, shading his eyes and thrilling with joy ; then, with a gulp, he swallowed down the emotion which threatened to overcome him altogether, and rising, placed his hand on Felix Dent's bowed shoulder.

"I would not willingly add to your misery," he said, simply ; "your conduct has been unchivalrous, and unworthy of a man of honour, but you were sorely tempted ; and I shall always remember that you did not spare yourself to relieve my awful suspense. Come, give me your hand ; I have heard of you ; my darling wrote to me of you, and I was fool enough to feel jealous even then ; she liked you, and therefore there must be some good in you, Dent."

Felix Dent grasped the proffered hand warmly, but it was some little time before he could recover himself sufficiently to renew the conversation, and

during these minutes Jack marched up and down the billiard-room in deep thought. but with his old jaunty step and self-reliant, not to say obstinate, tilt of the chin.

Dent did not return to his work that afternoon, the manager readily accepting his excuse of a sudden headache; but though the two men sat together talking for hours in Dent's lodgings, their confusion and perplexity only appeared to grow the greater, for since Felix Dent had had nothing whatever to do with Ruth's flight from her home, why, in the name of wonder, had she taken that extraordinary step? and why also should she have hidden herself from her father? Felix could not help his companion to solve the enigma in any way, but he proved to Jack that without doubt Lady Forrest and her cousin were mixed up in the matter; for it was evident from the fact that the Baronet still believed in his daughter's shame, that a written confession of his share in the transaction which Dent had sent the old man within a week of Ruth's flight had been intercepted.

At a late hour the young men parted, Jack

steadily refusing to accept any hospitality from Dent, and repairing to a respectable coffee-house in the neighbourhood. At half-past eight the next morning once more he presented himself at 'The Lodge,' with the intention of questioning Sir Richard minutely as to any relations or friends with whom Ruth might have taken shelter; but at the gates he was refused admission, nor would even threats induce the lodge-keeper to allow him to pass.

"My orders are strict, sir," he said; "my lady says you are not to be allowed within the gates. Sir Richard nearly died from the excitement of seeing you yesterday; and the doctor says another interview with you might kill him. My lady won't see you herself either, sir, and Mr. Westall, he isn't here."

"So Lady Forrest defies me, does she?" Jack muttered, turning away. "Well, I can't battle with her now—I can't force myself in, so the poor old man must bear his weight of trouble for the present. If I wrote they would not let him have my letter any more than Felix Dent's. They have been working

to secure her money, of course ; but what means did they take to get her out of the way ? Now let me think. All Felix Dent can tell me is that on the 10th of August Ruth ordered the cabman to drive to King's Cross. Well, I'll work this business out by myself—I'll find her somehow. I am not going to be cheated out of my happiness in this way. My poor girl, my dear ! ”

Jack went to King's Cross Station, but naturally enough could find no traces of his lost love, and from there he walked to the street to which he had conveyed George Bartram the previous morning. He was welcomed warmly by the father and daughter, but he declined to join their frugal meal. There was a restless fit upon him which would not allow him to be quiet for a minute.

Through Kate he heard of a poor but decent house in the neighbourhood, where he could rent a furnished bedroom, and have his food cooked ; and thither he conveyed the luggage which Bartram had taken care of until then. In the afternoon he turned out again, and visited every police-station and hospital within a radius of two miles of King's

Cross. At night he came back to his poor lodging utterly worn out.

“No one can tell me anything,” he mused, with a heavy sigh. “Well, I will begin again to-morrow; they all seem to think the chances are she has not gone out of London. Her father says she might have had thirty or forty pounds, for all he knows to the contrary, when she left home; that would keep her for a time. If I wasn’t so hard up myself I would advertise to-morrow, but I daren’t; I must keep body and soul together until I find her.”

But days and weeks passed by, and still Jack searched vainly. The lines in his forehead grew deeper, and the silver threads more frequent among his hair, and often Kate Bartram would whisper to her father as the young man left them after sitting with them for an hour or so,—

“I would give a great deal to be able to relieve Mr. Thornton’s trouble, father. What can it be, I wonder? It makes my heart ache to see him.”

CHAPTER IV.

THE middle of December found Ruth comparatively comfortably situated. The weather had cleared up after that memorable foggy November evening in which Kate Bartram had come to her rescue, and the light in her room being really good, she had been able to work with much greater rapidity than in her dark little parlour at Mrs. Burton's. Mr. Pratt, too, appeared determined to make up for his severity on that miserable occasion, and not only readily agreed to lend Ruth an easel, but showed no disposition to find any fault with the pictures she took to him.

Her expenses also being considerably reduced, by the end of the month Ruth had managed to make her poor room far more habitable. A square of red drugget covered the floor; and a cheap tablecloth, a toilette cover for the chest of drawers, and

striped curtains for the windows, made the apartment altogether a different place. Nor did Ruth attend to her own comfort only. Before she spent a farthing on herself which was not absolutely necessary for coals and food, she remembered her debt of gratitude, and it is certain the additions to her own room did not give her one-tenth of the pleasure that she experienced in a new fender and set of fire-irons, and a pretty rug which she placed before Kate's fireplace during the temporary absence of herself and her father.

The friendship she had formed with the young wood-carver was also an immense comfort to Ruth. There was a certain amount of reticence in her nature which made it very difficult to her to lay bare the secrets of her heart, even to the most sympathetic eye, and therefore she did not confide her love troubles to her new friend ; but Kate interested her greatly, and when, by degrees, she had learnt her sad story, the pity which filled her breast soon merged into a more tender sentiment. By-and-by it became a habit with the girls to work together, Ruth encouraging Kate to bring her tools

into her more comfortable room, partly that she might have her society, but more because she knew the other's poverty was extreme, and that she and her father, whose lameness showed no improvement, often sat and shivered with the cold, because they had not the means to supply themselves with sufficient fuel.

Once Ruth ventured very hesitatingly to suggest that she might be permitted to replenish their coal cupboard, but her well-meant offer had caused both her neighbours such evident distress that she never renewed it, and while she deplored her inability to serve them, she could not restrain a warm feeling of respect for the haggard invalid and his work-worn daughter, who preferred doing without almost the necessities of life to being beholden for them to another's charity.

Kate, however, made no difficulty about accepting Ruth's invitation to sit and work with her, and sometimes, much to the young artist's satisfaction, was even induced to share her humble dinner ; but she would not do this unless she was allowed to relieve her companion of the trouble of cooking it,

and Ruth, perceiving it was only on those conditions that her guest would eat at her expense, did not argue the point.

It was over these simple meals that Kate talked most freely, and it was then Ruth heard of George Bartram's friend, John Thornton, whose unspoken trouble and careworn face apparently possessed the most intense interest for Kate.

But though Ruth was not inclined to be discursive on the subject of her own love affairs, like all true women she fancied she had a very keen perception of its signs in others, and one day she smilingly taxed Kate with having more than friendly sentiments towards her father's mysterious visitor. The girl's reception of her remark, however, proved to her that she was mistaken in this.

"I in love with Mr. Thornton or he with me!" Kate cried. "Oh, Miss Martin, if you knew him even as well as I do, you wouldn't think that. He's altogether above father and me; besides, I am sure from his expression that he is in love with some one else. He has the saddest look in his eyes that I've ever seen; and yet blue eyes are generally so bright."

“He has blue eyes, has he?” Ruth said with a sigh of recollection. “What is he like altogether?”

“Oh, very handsome,” was the earnest reply, “though dreadfully thin and careworn; his hair is quite grey at the sides, as grey as father’s almost, but his beard is brown.”

“And your father has not known him long?” Ruth continued, forcing herself on her companion’s account to show an interest in the melancholy Mr. Thornton.

“No, only for a few months,” Kate replied, “but Mr. Thornton seems to find it a comfort to come and sit with father, though he says very little, and he sighs so heavily that sometimes I feel inclined to burst out crying. I wish you would come into our room one evening and see him, Miss Martin. Perhaps he might speak to you more freely than to us, you being a lady.”

“Oh, Kate,” Ruth replied, laughing at the other’s earnestness, “that’s not at all probable; and if it were, I’m sorry I cannot help you to unravel this mystery. You know I have a horror of strangers, and I hope you don’t try to excite Mr. Thorn-

ton's curiosity about me as you do mine about him."

"No, indeed," Kate answered, "I don't talk about you to any one, Miss Martin. I understood from you at the beginning that you didn't wish it. Mr. Thornton knows I have a friend in the house, no more than that; but I should like you just to see him, he's so different to most of the men one comes in contact with; he is so kind, father says no woman could have been more gentle than he was during his accident; Mr. Thornton nursed him, you know, Miss Martin, when he had that accident on board the *Stirling Castle*."

"The *Stirling Castle*!" Ruth cried, remembering the agony of mind she had suffered while this ship had been overdue; "did your father come over in the *Stirling Castle*?"

"Yes, father was a steerage passenger on board that ship, and so was Mr. Thornton."

With a heightened colour Ruth leant forward, and laid her hand on Kate's arm.

"Did your father know anything of the saloon passengers on board the *Stirling Castle*, Kate?"

"I should say not," Kate answered, looking in surprise at the flushed face, "but I will ask him, if you like."

"Yes, do," Ruth continued eagerly, "I should be very thankful if he could let me have a list of the names of the saloon passengers."

George Bartram could give his daughter no information on the subject, but John Thornton, happening to come in that evening, advised his applying to the steward of the *Stirling Castle*, who occasionally came to see the lame man, in whom he had taken some interest; and through this steward Ruth obtained the list she longed for with such feverish impatience. Eagerly she ran her eyes down it, but no John Rathbone appeared among the names, and Kate's heart ached as she heard the grievous sigh with which Ruth laid the useless paper aside.

But though this incident had no immediate result it affected Ruth very strongly, for it revived the terrible anxiety in her mind with regard to her lover. It cannot be said that for one single hour Ruth had been free from anxiety on his account,

but for a time the positive difficulty of living had forced her thoughts into another channel, and, having at length arrived at the conclusion that Jack would not return to England until Christmas, she had resolutely fought against the inclination to dwell on the subject, knowing well that sleepless nights and terrible depression were the invariable results of her cogitations.

Now, however, she could think of nothing else, her circumstances were more easy, and she could even afford to lay her brush aside sometimes while she sat with contracted brows and tightly compressed lips trying to solve the knotty problem how she was to let her lover know her whereabouts when he did arrive without discovering her hiding-place to her father's wife.

Hour after hour she puzzled her brain, but to no purpose. It was already the second week in December; at any moment Jack might reach London, he might even be there then searching vainly for her.

As this terribly tantalizing thought occurred to her one afternoon, Ruth sprang to her feet, in so

doing upsetting her easel and startling Kate Bartram, who had been for some few minutes regarding the rapt face of her companion with close attention.

“What can I do?” Ruth mused, walking up and down with her hands clasped behind her, utterly heedless of the other’s wistful glance; “if I only knew some friend of his to whom I could write, I would risk doing that. But Jack had no intimate friends in London; he came to us during his first week in England, and I recollect his saying that after he knew us he cared to make no more acquaintances.”

For a few minutes longer she paced her room in the deepest perplexity, and then she uttered a loud exclamation of relief, and, raising her eyes, became aware of Kate Bartram’s gaze of wondering sympathy. With a smile Ruth crossed the room, and bending down, kissed the pale cheek.

“Don’t be afraid, Kate,” she said, almost merrily, “I am not going out of my senses, but I fancy I am beginning to see my way a little clearer; I was in an awful fog just now—a figurative fog, you understand—not such a one as you and I remember

a month ago, my dear. Ah, don't shake your head at me, you always try to stop me when I speak of that night, but if you want to forget it, I don't. If only my ship would come home, Kate, we wouldn't work quite so hard, my dear, would we? and your father should have the best advice money could get him. Now, don't look so obstinate, I could not think so badly of you as to imagine you would not share my prosperity if my ship did come home. And who knows, Kate," she cried, with a rapturous light in her eyes, "who knows, it may be even now coming into port?"

"See, here," she continued, checking her emotion, and laughing tenderly at Kate's puzzled expression, while she exhibited the picture she had just finished with an affectation of inordinate conceit. "Can you look at that masterpiece, Kate Bartram, and continue to doubt the glorious prospect that is before me? I am going to sell this picture to Mr. Pratt to-night; he will only give me fifteen shillings for it, it is true, but that fifteen shillings will come in very conveniently just now, for, between ourselves, I am a trifle hard up; but if my ship has

reached its port, that doesn't matter, does it? Oh, Kate, smile, smile! There, that's right, I am more happy at this moment than I have been for months; I can't tell you why now; some day, when it is all over and I can look back upon my trouble as a thing of the past, I may be able to speak of it, but I know you will sympathize with my joy although you do not understand it. Now, dear, you won't think me unkind if I ask you to leave me for a few minutes, will you? I have a letter to write."

Left to herself, Ruth took up her pen and wrote as follows:—

"Jack, my darling, I have only just thought of writing to the Langham Hotel. For months I have been trying to find a way of communicating with you, and only five minutes ago the Langham Hotel came into my head. Forgive me, my dearest, if you have suffered more suspense than you need on my account. I ought to have remembered you always stayed at the Langham, but I have been in such trouble I am afraid I have become rather stupid. Don't be uneasy about me, though, darling, I am quite safe and well, and when I see your dear

face again I shall be perfectly happy. Oh, Jack, come to me ; I cannot write the thoughts of my heart, only come to me. I shall post this ; I daren't present myself at a place like the Langham for fear of being recognized, as you know many of my father's acquaintances stop there. Don't be shocked when you see this house, dear love ; I am not rich, but I am safe and well, remember that."

Signing the letter, and placing it in an envelope, Ruth sealed it, and then she heard a workmen's bell begin to ring outside which she knew indicated she had only five minutes in which to catch the post, not sufficient time if she were obliged to go to the main thoroughfare to obtain a stamp.

Knocking at Kate Bartram's door, she entered hurriedly, and found her, as she expected, alone in the room, her father having gone to the hospital.

Kate had a stamp somewhere, she was sure, but it was a few seconds before she could remember where it was, and Ruth was just taking it from her hand when she heard George Bartram's slow step on the stairs, and his voice in conversation with some one who, however, did not reply.

"It must be Mr. Thornton," Kate cried; "he's helping father upstairs, he often does that. Oh, Miss Martin, don't run away; I do want you to see him, just for an instant."

"It is impossible, Kate," Ruth stammered, "I must post this letter. Don't be hurt, dear; but I cannot see any stranger, really I cannot."

So saying, Ruth went quickly across the landing to her own room, and the instant she heard her neighbour's door shut, she ran swiftly downstairs, bearing in her hand her precious letter, and under her cloak the picture for Mr. Pratt. In three minutes the missive was consigned to the letter-box, and then, with a light confident heart, Ruth stepped out bravely in the direction of the picture-dealer's shop.

At this very moment Jack Rathbone sat in George Bartram's room, with his arms folded and his head sunk upon his breast, immersed in painful thought, while Kate helped her father off with his outer things, and inquired the surgeon's opinion of his injury.

On the first day of his search for Ruth it had

occurred to Jack that she might possibly write to the Langham, and full of hope he had gone there to ask if there were any letters; but no communication awaited him, and after calling persistently every day for six weeks, he came to the conclusion, with a groan of despair, that in all probability Ruth had forgotten he had stayed there while he was in town before; and just an hour ere Ruth posted her letter he had turned his back finally upon the Langham, murmuring disconsolately,—

“What is the use? If she had been going to write there she would have done so long ago. I will go no more, for though I expect nothing I am fool enough to feel the disappointment every day just as keenly as if I did. Ah, my darling, I am losing hope fast, and yet I know you must be concealed somewhere in this cruel city.” And then he clenched his hand and stamped his foot upon the ground, and once more he bent his steps towards Islington, and pacing up and down the principal thoroughfares, scrutinized the faces of the passers-by with a wistful intentness which startled some of them considerably.

The first fortnight of Jack's search had been occupied in visiting the metropolitan hospitals and police stations, but naturally with no result, and then he had suddenly seen Mrs. Burton's advertisement, and had been almost thrown off his balance with a positive delirium of joy. The disappointment that he experienced on that occasion brought on an attack of low fever which kept him to his bed for ten days, and when he once more turned out he was so giddy he could scarcely drag himself along.

But though his body was weakened, his spirit was still strong. The shock he had received at Mrs. Burton's had knocked him down for a time, but when he recovered from it, he tried to comfort himself with the reflection that things were a little brighter than they had been, for that now there was no doubt Ruth was alive and well, though from what he could understand she was poor. Mrs. Burton, however, had not thought it prudent to enlighten her visitor too fully as to the movements of her mysterious lodger, his shabby aspect convincing her that at any rate she could not hope to make much out of him, and so Jack had no idea that

Ruth followed any profession ; had he known of her painting he would have had a good clue to work upon, and it is certain Mr. Pratt, the most important picture-dealer in the neighbourhood, would have been questioned closely on the subject.

Therefore it came about that the almost despairing lover was reduced to walking the streets on the vague chance of meeting Ruth ; but as he gave up the search, completely exhausted with his ceaseless tramping to and fro at nightfall—and she never left her home while a glimpse of daylight remained—it was not strange that they should never have encountered each other, although on her walks to and from Mr. Pratt's, Ruth passed along the very streets which Jack had haunted all day.

The money Jack brought with him lasted him a month only, for during the first fortnight he had been compelled to ride constantly, as the distances to be gone over were great ; and, moreover, continual tips were necessary before the hospital porters would make any effort to remember what accidents were brought in on a particular foggy evening in November ; but the young man had a

good wardrobe, and by disposing of all but the rougher things, he calculated he should be able to support himself for a few weeks, at any rate. After that he would be obliged to try for work of some kind, but he determined to come down to his last shilling before he relaxed his search in any degree.

"I shall find her," he would mutter. "If I can only keep on long enough, I *must* find her."

Mr. Pratt was even more beaming than usual when, after having posted her letter, Ruth took him her picture. It happened that the subject of her painting was a very bright one, and represented the garden of 'The Lodge' with the may and lilac-trees in full blossom; while the grassy bank which sloped down to the sunlit water was golden with buttercups. Mr. Pratt's eyes grew quite misty as he gazed at the glowing little picture.

"You'll think me foolish, no doubt, young lady," he said, wiping his eyes unaffectedly, "but this painting of yours touches me; to an old man there is always something almost pathetic in the beauty of spring. I never look at a spring landscape

without thinking of the youth which has gone from me for ever ; but it is only for the moment that it saddens me, for I know that, looking back upon it, I can appreciate its glories better than those who, like yourself, are still in the spring-time of your life. Let me have as many of such subjects as these as you can, my dear ; your treatment of all aspects of nature is good, but these are the scenes which open the heart, and call one's better feelings into play. Summer, autumn, winter, each season has its beauties, but none of them appeal to us as spring does, for the world itself seems young and trustful then. The man who is incapable of being refined, cheered, and softened, by a picture like this has less good in him than the average. In that little painting it appears to me the immortal poet's words are exemplified : 'Tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything,' and though I admit I am impressionable—curiously impressionable for an old man—I cannot imagine any one looking at a scene like that and then doing some mean, dishonourable act, and therefore I consider

such pictures are really beneficial to society at large."

The old dealer and Ruth talked pleasantly together for a few minutes more, and then, having received her fifteen shillings, the girl took her leave. It was still only half-past six, but the night was clear and bright, and there was an invigorating freshness about the air which seemed to excite and raise Ruth's spirits in a singular manner.

"I cannot go home yet," she thought, "I couldn't sit still this evening, I am certain, without being really tired. I feel as if there were a positive craving upon me to-night for some sort of enjoyment; just as I used to feel in the dear old days before I made up my mind to tell father that a theatre was absolutely necessary to my peace of mind. Ah, poor father! he never refused me, though he was often victimized himself."

The thought of her father saddened Ruth for a few moments, but the curious excitement which was the result of having written her letter, soon dispelled the cloud.

"I don't know what's the matter with me," she

continued; "of course a theatre's out of the question: I couldn't pay for my ticket, for five shillings of this I owe to the artist's colourman; and even if I could afford it I shouldn't enjoy it by myself; but I must do something, I can't and won't go home yet. The last time I went to the theatre Jack was with me; well, who knows, it may not be long before he takes me there again! Perhaps he is reading my letter at this moment! Why no, how foolish I am, of course it can't get there until the last post to-night; but I know what I'll do; yes, I'll walk to Langham Place, and look at the hotel; nobody's likely to recognize me if I keep my veil down; that will give me something to do, and at any rate I shall be tired when I get home. I might even see Jack, though that's a very forlorn chance; there is something delightful, however, in the idea of only looking at the house he will be sure to go to directly he reaches London."

It took Ruth nearly three-quarters of an hour to walk sharply from Mr. Pratt's shop to the Langham Hotel, but when she arrived at her destination she was still as fresh as when she started. It appeared

to her that nothing could tire her that evening, and after gazing with yearning eyes for ten minutes at the closely-drawn blinds of the hotel, she determined to return home by a long circuitous route; and to look at the shops on her way.

Avoiding the crowded Regent Street, almost at once she turned into Great Portland Street, and decided that that would be her best way of getting into the Marylebone Road, through part of which she was bound to go in order to reach the unfashionable neighbourhood in which she lived. But Great Portland Street was just the sort of thoroughfare she was in the humour for : there were numerous engraving and curiosity shops, which afforded her plenty of amusement, and the crowds which thronged the pavement were not of the class among whom she might expect to meet any of her former acquaintances ; they were busy people even at that hour of the evening, and therefore she had no fear of being interfered with, as, with her veil lowered, she loitered in front of the shops, and examined their contents with as much interest as though she were a country cousin up in town for the first time.

At length she came to a shop which engrossed her attention to a far greater extent than any she had seen yet; it was a picture-dealer's, and at a glance she recognized that the specimens displayed in the window were of a very different order of merit to those she had been accustomed to see at Mr. Pratt's. There was nothing, perhaps, very striking in the pictures exhibited, but to Ruth, who for so long had seen no good work of any kind, they were a positive delight, and in the dear old days she had never given more earnest consideration to the works on the Academy walls than she did to these. One by one she examined them with a critical eye, dwelling on their merits, and glossing over their faults; but presently she gave a little gasp, and removing her thick veil hastily, rubbed her eyes.

In the centre of the large window, close down against the glass, was a small picture which she recognized at once as one of her own landscape sketches—a sketch she had sold to Mr. Pratt about six weeks before.

It was not, however, the fact of the picture being

displayed so conspicuously, or the splendid gold frame that surrounded it which caused her at the first instant almost to doubt the evidence of her own eyes; what bewildered her altogether was the price of the painting, seventy guineas, and furthermore that on the right-hand corner of the canvas, in large obtrusive letters, should be the signature of a well-known and very fashionable landscape painter, an artist whom Ruth regarded with the highest admiration, and on whose style, no doubt perfectly unconsciously, she had modelled her own.

CHAPTER V.

FOR a few minutes Ruth stood lost in perplexity, staring at the familiar little painting, and then her cheek flushed hotly, and a gleam of honest anger came into her eyes.

“What an infamous thing!” she thought; “they have bought my picture of Mr. Pratt, and very likely paid him next to nothing for it—for he told me the other day that at present he scarcely covered the expense of framing the canvases—and then they dare to put Mr. L——’s name upon them, and foist them on the public as his work.”

But Ruth was not naturally disposed to think hardly of any one. Except in the case of her step-mother, for whom her aversion had been an instinct, she was somewhat easily imposed upon, and at this point she stopped short.

“Perhaps, though, I am doing this man an

injustice; he may have been deceived himself. Very likely Mr. Pratt disposed of the picture to some one who has, in his turn, sold it again after adding the name. I must say this shop looks too respectable for the proprietor to practise such dishonesty as this wilfully. Well, any way, my course is quite clear, and if they are all right they will be only too grateful to me for opening their eyes to the imposture. Is it possible, I wonder, that any one who has ever seen one of Mr. L——'s lovely river scenes could mistake that feeble effort of mine for one of them?"

Strong in her purpose, forgetting in her excitement to replace her veil, Ruth walked boldly into the shop, and asked the somewhat lackadaisical young man who was seated at a desk in the centre of the handsomely furnished gallery, whether she could see Mr. Bristowe, the proprietor.

"I daresay you can," the young fellow replied, looking in admiration at the girl's glowing cheeks and bright eyes; "do you wish to see him on business?"

"Yes; I am, I suppose I may say, an artist."

The young man nodded somewhat familiarly.

"You are lucky in choosing to-night," he said. "Mr. Bristowe is always here until seven on Wednesdays; as a rule he leaves at five. If you'll wait here for a few minutes I'll let him know that a lady artist wishes to see him; the governor is rather partial to lady artists. Perhaps you'll like to have a look round the gallery; we've got some very good pictures here, as you see. Mr. Bristowe has dealings with lots of R.A.'s, buys their pictures right off the easel, he doesn't care for anything that's been exhibited elsewhere, don't you understand."

It was fully five minutes before the rather objectionable clerk returned to say that Mr. Bristowe would be with Ruth shortly. During his absence she had taken the opportunity of studying the works of art displayed upon the walls, a very rapid glance proving to her that if he were honest Mr. Bristowe was a very bad judge of pictures, as well as an extremely credulous man.

In all there were half a dozen pictures signed by well-known painters, and three out of these, at any rate, Ruth was positive were spurious; the others

might have been genuine, but if they were so, they were very poor specimens of the artist's work. There was also another of her sketches with Mr. L——'s name attached to it, and she was standing in front of this when she heard a soft cough, and turning hastily found the proprietor of the gallery standing at her elbow.

Mr. Bristowe was an æsthetic, emaciated man, with long red hair, a shaven face, languid, insolent eyes, and very thick lips. He was dressed in brown velvet, and wore a vivid crimson silk handkerchief, the ends floating free under his low, turned-down collar, which displayed the whole of a long, painfully thin, and yellow throat.

Altogether there was something excessively repugnant to Ruth in Mr. Bristowe, the more so because he made not the slightest effort to conceal the admiration she excited in him, but stared at her through his half shut-eyes, with his head thrown back at an angle which displayed his parchmenty throat to the fullest possible advantage, his sensual lips parted in a patronizing smile.

“And so you are an artist,” he said, addressing

Ruth in a fluty, effeminate voice, which, together with his impertinent stare, filled her with a sensation of positive loathing. "Ah, you needn't have told me that, one glance at your face would have shown me that the sacred flame of art is alight within you. The tender soul of a true artist can always be seen in her eyes. Have you brought a specimen of your talent? If so, I shall be glad to give it my most intense attention. I love to do business with ladies; intercourse with them refines what in itself is painfully vulgar—the interchange of money. Many of the pictures here were painted by women, very dear, clever women, whom I hold in the most loving respect."

Ruth's face crimsoned, and her eyes began to sparkle in proud disgust, while her short, well-cut upper lip, curled with contempt and indignation.

"I am sorry to hear you have much to do with lady artists," she replied with scant civility, "because I am afraid some of your clients are excessively dishonest persons."

"Dishonest!" Mr. Bristowe cried, with a plaintive drawl, lifting his thin heavily-ringed hands

in horror. "Oh, my dear lady, don't use such a jarring term here, it is so utterly out of harmony with all these tender surroundings."

"That I cannot help," Ruth continued, curtly. "I am speaking the truth, and from what I see here I should imagine you are not used to the truth."

With a pathetic roll of the eyes, Mr. Bristowe passed his two hands over his head, smoothing his long shining hair, which was combed back from his big forehead, into still lankier whisps.

"Truth is distinctly precious," he murmured, uneasily, "though it is sometimes jarring too; but speak more plainly, if you please. I have been doing much to-day, and my brain is weary with many thoughts."

Controlling herself by a strong effort, Ruth pointed to her own picture, before which they stood.

"That painting has a false signature," she said, sternly, "and that, and that, and that," indicating the other three of which she was perfectly certain; "there is another, also, in the window,

which I know to be spurious. With regard to those three to your left, I cannot speak positively," she continued, more warmly, "but if they are genuine the artists never did such bad work before."

If, however, Ruth expected to startle Mr. Britowe, she was much deceived. With a furtive meaning glance out of the corners of his eyes at his assistant, who turned away to conceal the amusement the girl's honest indignation afforded him, the æsthete shook his head with a sickly smile of patience.

"You grieve me," he wailed out, "you really grieve me. My soul was in such yearning loving harmony to-night; there was not a discordant note in my whole being, and now I feel like 'sweet bells jangled out of tune, and harsh.' To be accused of attempting to impose upon the public, and worse, far worse than that, to be accused of taking such names as these in vain, why, it positively pains me! I am weakly, as you see, but if a man had brought such a charge against me, I would have put all the strength of my body into my arm; under a woman's

injustice, however, I can only bow my head and suffer. Ah, it is woman, soft, gentle woman who deals us the cruelest blows."

Mr. Bristowe bowed his head with exaggerated meekness, and once again he passed his two hands over his smooth hair, but Ruth was not to be imposed upon by such flagrant hypocrisy as this. Biting her lips to keep down her anger, which was all the more fierce because, notwithstanding the aggressive tone she had adopted, Mr. Bristowe still continued to regard her with his offensive smile of approbation, she went on,—

"I don't want to argue the matter with you, I shall be glad to end this interview as quickly as possible. It seems to me only right, however, that you should know this. I cannot vouch for what I have said about any of the pictures except this one, and the one in your window. These I know are not by Mr. L——, for I painted them myself!"

Ruth spoke emphatically, and her indignation rose apace when, with a grotesque shrug of his thin shoulders, Mr. Bristowe's smile broadened, and throwing his head back until his lank hair fell away

from his collar in straight tails, he regarded her with a still more languishing expression in his sleepy eyes.

“I cannot contradict you, really; if you were to say you painted Sir James Milton’s pictures for him, I should only respond that he was a lucky man to have his ideas interpreted in so distinctly valuable a manner. I can only say that those two little pictures were sold to me as Mr. L——’s, and if you act as Mr. L——’s ghost, all the better for him. I would willingly be haunted by the same charming presence, I can assure you.”

“I don’t understand you,” Ruth replied, hotly, “I repeat that those pictures are my own work.”

“You don’t understand the term ‘ghost’?” Mr. Bristowe continued, with a high irritating laugh. “A ‘ghost’ in an artist’s studio is a very useful spirit, and in your case a very ornamental one too. ‘Ghosts’ do a good deal of our artists’ work for them, and then the master puts the precious finishing touches. How much, therefore, Mr. L—— did to these two pictures, of course, I cannot say, but I can scarcely suppose—really, my dear lady, my faith

in human nature is too great for that—I can scarcely suppose he would affix his signature to the work of another, even though it were that of the guardian angel specially devoted to his interests. Now, don't wrinkle that pretty forehead of yours, and 'dart not scornful glances from those' quite too lovely 'eyes.' If any one is to blame, it is Mr. L——, not I."

"Mr. L—— can have had nothing whatever to do with this," Ruth cried, indignantly. "I believe him to be a most honourable gentleman. The person you bought them from imposed upon you. May I ask who that was?"

"You may certainly ask," Mr. Bristowe replied, with another sickening smile, "but I could not possibly answer you."

"I sold these pictures to Mr. Pratt," Ruth continued; "he will testify to the truth of what I say. Mr. Pratt knows that they are my unaided work. With regard to Mr. L——, I never even saw him in my life."

Mr. Bristowe nodded his head slowly and gently, but a gleam of relief appeared in his eyes when

Ruth admitted that the great painter was not known to her.

“And I do not know Mr. Pratt,” he said, advancing towards the girl with such insolent familiarity that instinctively she drew back a step or two; “he is a very delightful man to do business with, I have no doubt, and I envy him his fair client; but I do not buy from dealers. I prefer to come in contact with the original pure fount, the soul of the artist. I find that such contact gives rise to much valuable thought, and that life is the sweeter and fairer for communion with beautiful natures, that are unsullied with the ugly taint of the world. Now, my dear lady, is there anything I can do for you? It hurts me, I assure you, to cut short an interview with so entirely gracious a lady as yourself, but it is already seven, you see, and while such necessary evils exist as trains, unfortunately the necessity for catching them also exists. If, however, my way lies your way, I shall be honoured if you will accept a share of my cab.”

If Mr. Bristowe’s design had been to get rid of Ruth quickly, he certainly could not have adopted a

better plan than this. Drawing herself up to her full height, the girl fixed her eyes in haughty displeasure on the smiling repellent countenance.

“I will say no more,” she replied, icily; “but I shall go at once to Mr. Pratt, and tell him the facts of the case. He will, no doubt, think it right to interfere in this matter, as I know he would object, as strongly as I do, to being in any way a party to a fraud.”

Without another word Ruth walked out of the gallery, ignoring altogether Mr. Bristowe’s profuse bows, and drawing her long cloak tightly round her, lest in passing through the door she should touch the objectionable æsthete, whose fluty voice followed her right out into the street.

Keeping her face to the fresh breeze that she might cool her hot cheeks, Ruth walked rapidly forward for a few minutes, and then she hailed a passing omnibus, and getting into it thought to herself,—

“I shall catch Mr. Pratt this way; I couldn’t walk it in the time, and it will only cost twopence; that is not a great extravagance, and I absolutely

must see Mr. Pratt to-night. Oh, that hateful Mr. Bristowe! It will be quite a comfort to tell Mr. Pratt about him. I am afraid, though, the dear old man will be dreadfully annoyed. I have an idea that horrid creature did buy those pictures of him, and is responsible for the false signatures himself. What will Mr. Pratt say? I am quite sorry to have to vex him. Well, I have had a little excitement to-night, at any rate, though I cannot say it has been at all of an enjoyable kind."

From the doorway of his gallery Mr. Bristowe saw the girl get into the omnibus. Re-entering with a grin, which displayed his teeth almost from ear to ear, he slapped his assistant on the back in a very commonplace manner.

"She's gone straight off to old Pratt," he said, with an explosive laugh that was singularly inconsistent with his sleepy languor of ten minutes previously. "I'd give ten bob to be present at the interview. By Jove, she's a splendid girl! I wonder who she is. She doesn't look much like the ordinary run of lady artists that we have to do with, eh, Ben? They are generally rather a seedy lot."

CHAPTER VI.

THE omnibus set Ruth down within a couple of hundred yards of Mr. Pratt's establishment, but between her and it was the shop of the artists' colourman with whom she dealt.

"Ah, so Briggs is not shut up yet," she thought, when she had gained the pavement. "Well, I had better wait just a minute to pay him and buy another canvas; his shop will be closed when I come away from Mr. Pratt's, and I can't afford to waste time, for when I've paid Briggs, and bought my canvas, I shall only have nine shillings left. And six shillings goes to-morrow for rent. Well, I can manage on the three shillings until Saturday. I have quite sufficient coals, and tea, and bread and butter to last me until then. It's rather an uncomfortably tight fit, but I have the scheme of my next picture well in my mind. I can finish it easily by

Saturday, and as it's another spring scene, I don't think Mr. Pratt is likely to be hard to please. Imagine that awfully, utter, and too, too abominable Mr. Bristowe, daring to ask seventy guineas for my poor little picture! I can't get over it at all. Can there be one person in the world sufficiently foolish to be gulled to that extent? However, Mr. Pratt will put the matter all right, of course. He must have the power to stop that sort of thing. I know I have heard of people being punished for getting money under false pretences, and there never was a falser pretence than that. I should be sorry to see Mr. L——'s face if he caught sight of that picture. I should feel inclined to sink into the ground with shame. I look upon it as a sacrilege, really."

Ruth transacted her business with Mr. Briggs as quickly as possible, but when she left his shop she shook her head with a half-humorous expression of perplexity.

"I am certainly reckless to-night," she thought. "Something seems to have thrown me off my balance. First I indulge in the extravagance of riding, and then I allow Mr. Briggs to prevail upon

me to buy what is not absolutely necessary. I shall have to beware of that little man for the future when my funds are lower than usual. He has an insinuating manner which it is hard to resist, and I now know I cannot steel myself against temptation when it takes the form of such a lovely little brush as this; and ninepence, after all, is not much, except that it is just a quarter of my available capital. Ah, there is Mr. Pratt coming out."

Running forward, Ruth stopped the old picture dealer just as he was about to close the door behind him.

"Oh, Mr. Pratt," she cried, looking quite affectionately into his benevolent face, "I am so glad you have not gone; you can spare me ten minutes, can't you? I really *must* speak to you."

"If you must, you must;" Mr. Pratt answered, with a pleasant smile. "I never venture to argue with a lady when she takes such a decided tone as that. Come in, my dear. Why, surely, you have been walking very fast; your cheeks are quite rosy. You won't think me impertinent, I am sure, when I tell you I consider a little extra colour is very

becoming to you; but still, if you were my daughter, I should say you were rather too handsome to walk in the streets of London alone so late in the evening as this. You don't think me rude, I hope?"

"Why, of course not," Ruth said. "It is good of you to give me your advice, but, really, nobody took any notice of me, for I had my veil down great part of the time. I admit I forgot about it at the last. Oh, let us go into your little room quick; I have had such a shock, and I have come to you for comfort."

"I am glad of that," the old man said, softly, leading the way, and relighting the gas in the inner room; "it reconciles a man to old age when young people bring their troubles to him. Now don't hurry, my dear; rest and compose yourself a little. I can see something has happened to disturb you. I am not in haste, and if I were I would willingly make my business wait for yours."

Ruth was obliged to delay a little while after this. The excitement she had undergone had rendered her more than usually emotional, and the old man's kind words and gentle voice went straight to her

heart, and sent the tears in a warm gush to her bright, steadfast eyes.

Mr. Pratt turned away, and busied himself in tidying some papers until she should have recovered herself, but when she said presently, with a tremulous little laugh, "I am quite ready now, Mr. Pratt; but you really mustn't be too kind to me to-night, for I am afraid I am in rather a more than ordinarily foolish humour," he seated himself near her, and laying his thin, white hand soothingly on her arm, remarked quietly,—

"You are never foolish; don't do yourself an injustice by speaking affectedly. Now tell me all about it, but don't excite yourself more than you can help, or you'll suffer for it to-morrow. What is this shock you speak of?"

"Mr. Pratt," Ruth commenced, "do you know Mr. Bristowe?"

"Mr. Bristowe!" Mr. Pratt repeated in involuntary surprise, removing his hand from her arm.

"Ah, I can see you do!" Ruth cried, warmly. "I felt sure he was telling me a falsehood, though why he should have taken the trouble to try and

impose on me when he knew I could find out the truth at once by referring to you, I cannot tell."

"Softly, softly," Mr. Pratt interrupted; "you may be labouring under some mistake, my dear. I have not said I know this Mr. Bristowe of whom you speak, and who it appears denies that he knows me."

"Oh, yes; but it is impossible to believe a word he says," continued Ruth, earnestly. "Your face showed plainly that you knew Mr. Bristowe when I mentioned him, and it is not a common name."

Mr. Pratt, whose exclamation in the first instance had been an entirely unguarded one, considered a moment, and then, with a curious tightening of his somewhat thin lips, he said, very quietly,—

"I know a Mr. Bristowe who is a picture-dealer in Great Portland Street very well by repute, though not personally; but I scarcely imagine that you can have come into contact with him, unless you have forgotten your signed agreement with me to work for no one else. I hope and trust, however, you have not done that, because it would be a very serious matter indeed, and would force upon

me a course of action which would be inexpressibly painful to me."

"Oh, no, no! I have not, I have not!" Ruth cried, in great distress. "How could you think me capable of such a thing? I don't know much about business, it is true, but I am not so ignorant as that. I know that I am bound to you, and I am very glad to know it."

"You are indeed," the old man responded, firmly. "It would be a breach of law and a punishable matter to break your contract. I am much relieved to find you understand that clearly; I was really afraid for the moment I had not explained the matter properly to you in the first instance. There is quite a heavy penalty for breaking contracts of this kind. But I am still entirely at a loss to understand what your transactions with Mr. Bristowe have been."

"I have had no transactions with him at all, from your point of view," Ruth replied, earnestly; "but I have found out that he is a horrible cheat, and I want you to interfere in the matter."

Mr. Pratt pushed his chair back a foot or

two, and a stronger red came into his pink cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean," he said, speaking slowly and somewhat under his breath.

"Why that man is actually exhibiting in his shop two pictures of mine which I sold to you within the last six weeks!"

"Well?"

"There is nothing wrong in that, I know," Ruth continued, warmly, "but he has had a false signature put upon them, that of Mr. L——, the R.A., and he is asking seventy guineas for each of them."

"How do you know that?" Mr. Pratt asked, still in the same slow manner.

"There is a ticket on the sketch shown in the window with the price upon it," Ruth responded.

"Ah! you saw it in the window? now I understand!" the old man said in brighter tones. "Well, it's very curious certainly, but don't worry yourself about this business, my dear, leave it to me, there must be some mistake about the matter. I will go and see this Mr. Bristowe to-morrow."

"Ah yes, do," Ruth cried; "I knew you wouldn't allow such things to go on, and Mr. Bristowe will certainly be expecting you."

With a start, Mr. Pratt rose.

"Expecting me!" he repeated, hoarsely.

"Yes," Ruth went on eagerly, not noticing the ominous frown that ruffled the usually placid forehead; "I told him I should come straight to you."

"You told him so? I thought you said you had had nothing to do with him."

"I have had no business dealings with him, I meant," Ruth continued, perfectly unconsciously; "I had an interview with him—a most unpleasant one, I can assure you—in which I told him that the pictures were mine, and I hinted very strongly that I considered him a cheat."

Mr. Pratt drew a deep breath, and stood for a moment with his lips so tightly compressed that they became quite pale, and then he said thickly, with an extraordinary alteration of manner which caused the girl's heart in the first instance to stop suddenly, and then to start beating at a furious rate—

“You told him that, did you—and what did he say?”

“I forget what he said,” Ruth faltered, staring aghast at the angry-looking countenance which had changed completely in one moment from mild benevolence to utter coarseness; “I forget his words, but I know he treated my accusation with perfect indifference. Oh, Mr. Pratt, what is the matter? Why do you look at me like that?”

“Well,” the old man responded, standing with his head thrust out towards her, and a cruel gleam in his eyes, “it strikes me that if you are going in for this sort of energetic move, it’s quite time you and I should understand each other a little better.”

“Understand each other!” Ruth gasped, shrinking away, while the floor seemed to rock under her feet.

“Yes, understand each other,” he repeated, angrily. “So long as I can remain on agreeable terms with the people I employ, I prefer to do so; but if they begin to assert themselves inconveniently, then I crush them!”

Ruth staggered up against the wall, and gazed blankly at him.

"You crush them!" she faltered, breathing with the utmost difficulty.

"Yes, I crush them—into powder if necessary," was the inexorable reply. "Now, look here, young woman, this is what you have to get into your head if you and I are to continue to do business together. When you've sold your pictures to me, and I've paid for them, they are mine—absolutely mine; do you hear? And you've no further right over them, than if you had never seen them before.

"Why," he continued, blazing into sudden fury with an oath which caused the poor girl's knees to tremble under her,—“Why, how dare you try to bring discredit upon me among the trade? How dare you, I say?”

"I bring you into discredit!" Ruth cried—"I don't know what you mean. For heaven's sake don't speak to me like this—I feel almost as if I were going mad!"

"Oh, you're not going mad!" the old man answered, brutally—"you are too sharp by half. Now,

then, listen to what I've got to say, and attend to it, unless you want to starve. You keep your eyes shut to what you see in the shop-windows for the future ; or, at any rate, keep your mouth shut, that'll answer my purpose just as well."

With a desperate effort, struggling against the faintness which almost overwhelmed her, Ruth raised her head, and fixed her scared eyes upon the enraged old man.

"Do you mean," she said with quivering lips, "that I am to lend myself to this fraud? Mr. Pratt—I cannot believe it—I cannot, I cannot! You are doing this to try me. If you have any pity in your heart give up this horrible pretence, it kills me."

"Oh, that's all humbug!" Mr. Pratt replied, with an indifferent shrug; "humbug is useful sometimes, but you and I have got beyond that, now. We kept up the pretty farce longer than most of us do, and we might have gone on for a bit if you hadn't meddled with what didn't concern you. We've done with it now, however, and the time has come for plain speaking between us. Now, I didn't sell

those pictures of yours to Mr. Bristowe, so nobody's got any hold on me; the way I do business is this, and mind you, I am not afraid of letting you into my secrets because I know you couldn't make any use of the information, for if we quarrel your evidence would be looked upon as prejudiced. Moreover, I want you to understand the sort of man you have to deal with in me, a man, young lady, who's got plenty of money to back him up, and who would fight you to the death—to the death, do you hear, in any court; that is, supposing," he continued with a sneering chuckle, "supposing you had the means of prosecuting me, which I doubt. Now, won't you sit down while I explain? Oh, very well, please yourself, if you're too proud, I am not."

With which the old man seated himself in his elbow-chair, and leaning back, opened his coat, and thrusting his thumbs into the arm-holes of his waistcoat, regarded the almost fainting girl with a crafty smile, which chilled the blood in her veins.

"This is my way of doing business," he continued, "and as far as money-making goes, it has proved a very successful way. I sell your pictures to a young

man I know, who is in my pay, that is to say he earns two pounds a week all the year round, and all he has to do for that, is to be the nominal purchaser of the picture at a small sum, and to affix any signature that he thinks suitable to the canvases, before he offers them for sale again at a higher rate, handing over to me what he receives, of course. It is also understood between us that if by any chance he should get into trouble, so long as he keeps silent about me, that I provide the means for his defence. Now you understand, no doubt, that if you should see fit to take any foolish steps in this matter, it is this poor young man—who, perhaps, from a strictly Christian point of view, is not altogether immaculate, but which of us is without fault?—who would suffer; and as he has a wife and two little children to support, it would be a serious matter for them, a terribly serious matter, to be deprived of the breadwinner.

“Now, what I should advise you to do, my dear,” Mr. Pratt proceeded, rising and resuming his smiling benevolence as suddenly as he had dropped it, “is to put on your considering cap when you go home,

and think this matter quietly over with an unprejudiced and calm judgment—I really think you will see your way to forgetting all about Mr. Bristowe and your disagreeable experience with him to-night. Now, let us shake hands and part good friends; we have both been a little warm, perhaps even ill-tempered, that is always a pity, for life is too short for quarrelling; however, let us recollect the old adage, and take comfort from it—‘The falling out of faithful friends renewing is of love’—let us trust it will be so in our case. Now I must really be off, it is past eight, you should have been home an hour ago. You have a canvas there I see, that’s right; on Saturday I shall hope for another little work from your gifted brush.”

But Ruth did not stir. For a moment she stood bracing up her failing powers, and then she once more raised her head proudly, and looked with righteous scorn at the hypocritical wretch who stood rubbing his delicate hands before her.

“Wait a minute,” she said, bravely, pushing back his extended hand with a dignified action; “I have listened to your words with wonder and

shame, and now you must hear what I have to say."

"Very well, my dear," Mr. Pratt responded, soothingly; "though, perhaps, if you are going to use harsh terms, we had better wait for another occasion when you can regard this matter more reasonably."

"I shall never think of it except with horror and indignation!" the girl cried boldly. "I will not tell you, Mr. Pratt, how much I have been deceived in you, and how truly unhappy I am to find you are what you are; but this I will say, I will work for you no more—from to-night our connection ceases altogether. Now let me pass, if you please. I have never felt so degraded as I do at this moment, when I realize that I have been used by you as a means of cheating the public and bringing honoured names into disrepute."

But going quickly to the closed door, Mr. Pratt placed his back against it.

"Just a moment," he said, coarsely; "you are speaking rather wildly, it appears to me. Your sentiments are very nice, I admit, and at another

time I should enjoy them ; just now, however, they are not to the purpose. You'll do no more work for me, you say ? How are you going to manage, then, unless, to be sure, you have a private income ?”

Ruth fell back a step or two, and her pale face grew a shade whiter.

“I tell you my connection with you must cease,” she cried, piteously, looking in terror at the callous old sinner ; “it is impossible for me to work for you under the present circumstances.”

“Well, that’s as you like,” the man replied, with ominous coolness. “I cannot force you to work for me, certainly ; but this I can do, and I will too,” he hissed with sudden ferocity, “I’ll throw you into prison if you work for any one else, and I warn you against trying to hoodwink me in the matter, either ; there’s not a picture-dealer in London who doesn’t know me, and to-morrow morning they’ll each receive a letter from me concerning you.”

Mr. Pratt waited a moment to watch the effect of this preposterous and idle threat upon his unfortunate victim ; and his eyes glistened with unholy

joy as he saw how completely the poor girl believed in his power of punishing her.

“You spoke a little too quickly just now, didn’t you?” he continued tauntingly; “never mind, I’ll forgive you. I never bear malice, especially against a pretty girl—pretty girls are always allowed to have their little tempers. Bring me another picture on Saturday, and we won’t allude to this business again.”

“I will bring you no more pictures!” she panted, pressing her hand over her heart. “I will never see you again.”

“Then you will starve!” was the brutal rejoinder.

“If Heaven wills it so, I shall. I would rather die than live in association with such a wretch as you. Now let me pass, let me pass, do you hear? I will not stay here another moment! I cannot breathe! The very sight of you is poisonous to me!”

There was something almost threatening in the aspect of the girl, and the old man shrank back as she advanced upon him. Then, with a stifled moan that would have pierced to any heart less callous

than his, the tortured creature fled from him, and out into the cold night air.

Scarcely conscious of what she was doing, the dazed girl pursued her way home; but when she reached the house she paused a moment before creeping stealthily up the stairs.

"Kate must not know," she muttered. "I must hide the truth from her, she is so poor, so poor, and she would go without herself that I might eat. Oh, God, help me to hide it from her!"

Gasping for breath, with the moisture trickling down her ashen face, Ruth dragged herself up the long dark flights; as she came to the last she heard Bartram's room door open and immediately after a man's step upon the stairs.

Shrinking into the deep, dark recess of the door near which she stood, Ruth held her black cloak up so as to hide her face, and the next instant an indistinct figure passed her so closely as almost to touch her. In another moment she was in her own room, and before Kate Bartram could cross the landing, she had drawn the heavy bolts of her door.

"May I not come in?" Kate said, cheerfully.

“Mr. Thornton has just gone. Did you not meet him on the stairs? How long you have been?”

“I am tired, very tired,” Ruth murmured. “Good night, dear, good night, I cannot talk to-night.”

She waited to hear Kate go away from her door, and then with a cry of anguish she tottered to the side of her bed and threw herself heavily upon it.

CHAPTER VII.

THE daylight was just breaking when Ruth rose from her bed. All the night, perfectly indifferent to cold, she had lain in a condition of stupor, which only differed from positive unconsciousness in the fact that though she appeared unable to move hand or foot and outward influences had no effect whatever upon her, she was still sensible of her horrible situation.

The position in which she found herself was indeed a terrible one, for unless Jack came to her rescue within a day or two, she saw no means of saving herself from absolute starvation.

But though throughout the long winter night she had remained immovable and tearless, shuddering from time to time, with her strained eyes staring into the darkness, with the first faint glimmer of day her courage returned, to some extent, and,

dragging herself to the mantelshelf, she lighted the small lamp which stood upon it, and then, with the utmost difficulty, with her half-frozen fingers she raked out the embers from her grate, and fetching wood and coals from the large chest, proceeded to light her fire, muttering to herself,—

“I am so cold, perhaps if I can get a little warmth into me, things will not seem quite so bad. I will put on the kettle, and have a cup of tea. Why, no wonder I feel so weak; I had my dinner at two yesterday, and it must be seven o’clock now; that’s seventeen hours. I won’t attempt to think any more until I have had something to eat.”

But when Ruth had eaten and drunk and, with her feet upon the fender, had warmed her shivering body, it still appeared to her that positively her only hope lay in Jack; but this thought brought more comfort than it had done before, for she recollected now that it was the 15th of December, and that her lover had promised her faithfully he would be with her by the 21st of December, if not a day or two before.

The 21st of December was Ruth’s nineteenth

birthday, and Jack had declared that if he were alive and capable of moving, nothing should prevent his bringing his birthday present on that day. Therefore, supposing he did not arrive at the Langham until the very morning of the 21st, Ruth calculated that she had six days only to provide for.

But six days is a very formidable period to a girl brought up in luxury, who has but two shillings and a few pence in her purse that she can call her own ; when the weather is bitterly cold, and she knows that her stock of coals cannot, at her ordinary rate of consumption, last her more than three days.

Then, again, on the 21st of December her week's rent would be once more due, and she could not, as she had done in the present instance, ask her landlady to grant her a day's grace, for she had seen, only the previous afternoon, that the delay even of one day, was a very serious matter to the poor woman ; and blaming herself for having miscalculated her means in the purchase of the little adornments of her room, Ruth had taken no offence at Mrs. Stone's ill-temper, and had altogether ignored her muttered threat that she couldn't have a per-

son in her house 'as didn't pay regular.' Every week she expected her money, and she kept no one over the week without it.

Ruth was the more inclined to regard Mrs. Stone's incivility indulgently, because she was aware that the woman's temper was sorely tried in other ways, her husband being at home on her hands in a helpless condition, bordering on delirium tremens, and the baby having once more fallen ill.

Furthermore, in the early days of Ruth's tenancy of her room, poor hard-worked Mrs. Stone, whose own circumstances were brighter just then, had been really kind; and entering warmly into the girl's desire to return to the Bartrams the comforts of which they had deprived themselves on her account, had allowed her to pay her week's instalment of rent at the end of the second week instead of at the beginning. Of this act of generosity and faith on her part Mrs. Stone did not fail to remind Ruth now, saying in reproving accents,—

“I didn't expec' as you would ask me to wait, after what I've done for you, Miss Martin, really I didn't. You see I'm in your power altogether since I give

up taking your money in advance. I didn't think as you'd have had the heart to have kep' me waiting for what's really my own; and me, with my wretch of a husband on the booze again, and that violent as the baby have to be kep' out of his sight for fear he does it a mischief, and not a penny coming in excep' from the rents, and the child wanting all sorts of things as I can't give it; I never slep' a wink all last night nor the night afore that either; and now to think of you're failing me. The Bartrams have never been one day behind since here they've been; and she's got a pretty struggle to keep the wolf from the door too, poor soul, and they've no curtains to their room nor carpet neither."

Ruth winced a little at this, but at the time she could not blame herself very severely for her modest extravagance. Now, however, the recollection of Mrs. Stone's words caused her the greatest uneasiness, for she saw plainly that her landlady at least must be paid on the 21st, or she would have to turn out of the house. She would turn out too, she was determined on that, for nothing should induce her to become a

burden to the Bartrams, whose half-starved faces and thinly-clad bodies had caused her many a bitter heartache.

Punctually at eight Mrs. Stone appeared, and Ruth paid her, receiving her tearful apologies with a kindly but sad smile.

"I have nothing to forgive, Mrs. Stone," she said, simply. "You were right, it was wrong to spend money on myself, unless I could be sure of settling my debts at the proper time."

"Ah, well," Mrs. Stone replied, wiping her red eyes with the corner of her dirty apron, "I am afraid I spoke rough, but perhaps it's just as well as you should get these things into your head, young lady. Of course I can see as you're not used to living among the poor; I ain't kep' a lodging-house for twenty years not to know as you're different from us; it don't take a owl of wisdom to see as far as that; and, bless your heart, Kate Bartram she's allays a grizzling about you. I do believe that gal worships your shadder even, it's wonderful! She notices everything, and to hear her complaining about your getting thinner, and your face being pale, why one would

think she didn't know what it was to be hungry herself, and yet, you will believe me, Miss Martin, I am certain sure as that gal hasn't had a bit of meat but what she's ate in here, all last week, I am, indeed. Lord save us ! a woman can't earn enough to keep a man and herself in clothes and food and firing on them gim-cracky frames, let her work as hard as she may. But there, I mustn't stand chattering here any longer. The child will be crying out for me, I expec', but I daren't bring it up through the cold, it's bitter to-day ; so I just locked my husband into the wash-house while I was away. Lor', Miss Martin, if you should ever think of marrying, get a blue-ribbon man, that's my advice to all young women as is stupid enough not to know when they're well off, and that's when they're single."

Ruth bolted her door again after the woman had gone, and then she began walking up and down her room with her brow puckered in thought. At half-past eight she heard the workman's bell, and heaved a bitter sigh.

"He has not received my letter yet," she mur-

mured, "if he had he would have been here before this, I know. Well, I must wait as patiently as I can, but how am I to keep my situation from Kate? If she comes in here she will guess at once how things are."

That afternoon, on returning from the hospital, George Bartram discovered his daughter in tears.

"I have offended Miss Martin," she sobbed; "oh, father, I am so unhappy!"

"Offended her! How can that be?" Bartram asked, sharply.

"I don't know, but she will not let me into her room."

"Haven't you seen her, then?"

"Yes, she came to the door, and her face was dreadfully white."

"Perhaps she is ill," Bartram suggested.

"But if she is ill, why shouldn't she let me come in, unless I have offended her?" Kate persisted. "Father, the only thing I can think of is that she is hurt with me about Mr. Pratt."

"In what way hurt?"

"I fancy," Kate continued, trying to subdue her

sobs, "that she has found Mr. Pratt out; I have heard her walking about her room a good deal, and she generally sits so quietly at her work."

"Well, if she has found him out, how can she blame you?" George Bartram asked.

"She may think I ought to have warned her," Kate replied tearfully; "but I had not the heart to do that. I knew it could do no good, for before she spoke to me about him she had signed an agreement, as I did, to work for no one else, and she was so happy in her faith in him it would have been cruel, I thought, to dispel it."

"But are you sure Pratt has behaved as badly to her as he did to you?" Bartram asked again.

"So far as I can understand he went through exactly the same course with her," Kate responded mournfully; "you know he sent me to half-a-dozen people in the city, who would none of them even look at my work, and on my letters of recommendation also there were some mysterious numbers. There was 1,000 marked on mine, and 1,500 on hers, and considering he paid me one pound, and Miss Martin one pound ten, no doubt that is his

system of warning the trade that they mustn't offer more than that. It's evident they all play into each other's hands in these matters."

With a sigh, the worn invalid patted his daughter soothingly on the shoulder.

"Don't fret, my dear," he said kindly; "it will all come right, don't you be afraid. Maybe Miss Martin is out of spirits about something else altogether; perhaps the good news she was expecting last night hasn't come. Well, you leave her alone, until she seeks you again, that's the truest kindness. I can't believe that's she angry with you, even if she does feel a little hurt about the old scoundrel. Why, Kate, Miss Martin loves you, and people like her don't take offence easily with those they care for. Everybody seems to be in trouble just now; I can't make it out. A man like Mr. Thornton, for instance, I wonder why it is that Fortune is so hard on him?"

"And why is she so hard on you, father?" Kate rejoined, kissing him tenderly; "there never was a better man in the world than you are. Mr. Thornton, at any rate, has health and strength."

"Ah! but he is very lonely, Kate," Bartram replied, smoothing the pale cheek gently. "I have my daughter to comfort me in my trouble, he has nobody. Well, we shall miss him, shall we not?"

"Miss him, father?"

"Yes; why, of course, you haven't heard about his going back to Australia?"

"Going back to Australia!"

"It's this way, so far as I can understand," Bartram continued, relieved to see his daughter wipe away her tears, under the excitement of this fresh interest: "Mr. Thornton has something to do with a mining company in Australia, and he's wanted out there. It seems he left word that letters for him were to be addressed to the post-office in Regent Street, and this morning he found one from a director of the company saying that he must go back at once, so he's going."

"But has he finished the important business he had over here, then?" Kate inquired. "I thought that was all going wrong."

"He's obliged to give that up, at any rate for the present," Bartram continued. "He told me he

felt constrained to go, for that the time might come when he should have bitter cause to regret it if he let any chance slip. I fancy he has been searching for somebody here, and that he's farther off the scent now than ever, and has come to the conclusion he had better go and do what he can out there, and then come back again."

"What makes you think that, father?" Kate asked eagerly.

"Why, he said to me, 'you see, Bartram, I might come back with money in my pocket, and if I had money I could have a dozen people working for me at this very moment; it's being so wretchedly poor that has made me fail. In three months I will be back again, with or without money.'"

"But if he has no money, father, how is he going to pay for his passage out?"

"Oh, Byron, the steward of the *Stirling Castle*, is standing his friend there; Thornton met him just after he received the letter, and Byron says he can manage to get him a steerage passage if he will make himself useful with the book-keeping. So he's going, poor fellow, with a heavy heart, I know."

“But not without saying good-bye, I hope,” Kate cried.

“No, he won’t do that, you may be sure ; but he told me he shouldn’t be able to come till the last night. Byron can give him a job now, and he wants a pound or two to settle up here, and get some of his clothes out of pawn. The ship starts from Liverpool on the 26th, and he’ll come here to say good-bye on the evening of the 24th. I was to tell you so.”

Five days passed—five days remembered throughout the winter as being the most bitterly cold that had been known for years before Christmas. Kate Bartram, wrapped in her thin cloak, sat shivering by their poor fire, scarcely able to hold her carving implements in her blue numbed fingers ; but the tears which rolled down her cheeks were not for her own discomforts : it was for the break in her friendship with Ruth that she grieved so sorely. Bartram, seeing how his daughter suffered, was disposed to be angry with Ruth, accusing her of unreasonable temper, and even of ingratitude ; but he soon desisted from this, perceiving that to cast any slur upon

her idol caused his gentle-hearted daughter even acuter sorrow.

For the five days Ruth had remained shut up in her room, but each time Kate had knocked at her door the answer had been the same. She was well, quite well, but she was very busy, and could see no one. But that Saturday afternoon at dusk it seemed to Kate matters had reached a culminating point of misery.

Very much depressed, for Bartram was keeping his bed, the terrible cold having affected his crippled foot seriously, Kate Bartram sat at her work, sighing grievously, and yearning for the companionship and sympathy which had been so dear to her. Presently she heard the heavy bolts withdrawn in Ruth's room, and immediately after the door opened.

Jumping up, impulsively, she ran out on to the landing. Opposite to her stood Ruth with a huge parcel in her arms. The girl's veil was down, and in the semi-darkness Kate could not discern her features; but her voice was unsteady, and sounded thin and weak to the anxious listener.

"I am going out for a few minutes, only for a very few minutes," Ruth said, ignoring Kate's anxious inquiries, and speaking with a curious air of nervous constraint, which occasioned the other a fresh pang; "but I don't know what to do about my room."

"About your room?" Kate faltered, keeping down her tears by an effort.

Yes," Ruth continued, more nervously than ever, "you see it is so awkward for me, I cannot lock my door when I go out as you can."

"But does that matter?" Kate asked again, in some surprise.

Ruth hesitated, and then she said, in low muffled tones,—

"It is not pleasant to fancy that Mrs. Stone, or—or—any one else might go into my room while I am away."

Kate shrank back; for an instant she did not reply, and then, with a sobbing catch in her breath, she faltered,—

"You need not be afraid, I should hear anybody coming up; I would not let them go in, and, of

course, unless I could do anything for you, I should not intrude myself."

"No, there is nothing that you can do, nothing at all," Ruth answered quickly, and then, afraid to trust herself to speak another word, she went down the stairs, leaving the poor young wood-carver positively consumed with grief at the cruel rebuff she had just received.

When Ruth returned she pretended not to see Kate looking timidly out through her half-closed door; but going hurriedly into her own room she bolted it once more, and then lighting her lamp looked around her and shivered involuntarily. The curtains, table-cover, and small square of red drugget were gone, and in the grate there smouldered a miserable handful of expiring embers.

Trembling with cold, Ruth drew from under her cloak a loaf of bread, and placed it on the table, and then going to the large chest, she raised the heavy lid—in an instant, however, she dropped it again.

"I daren't," she thought, "I daren't use the

last I have to-night; I will go to bed, I shall be warmer there. Thank God I can pay Mrs. Stone to-morrow; but when that is done I shall be without a penny."

She shivered again, and then quelling her growing terrors bravely, she continued, with a quivering lip,—

"By to-morrow night Jack will be here; there is no need for me to be frightened, I have more bread here than I want; nobody could starve while they have bread and water. I should not mind if it were not for Kate, and if I were not so cold; this cold seems to freeze all one's courage. And poor Kate! What must she think of me? Her eyes were red with crying. But I cannot have her in here; now, more than ever, I must keep her out. How could I account for those things having gone?"

At ten o'clock on the morning of the 21st a knock came at Ruth's door. Opening it quickly she went out upon the landing. Her eyes glittered feverishly, but when her glance fell upon Mrs. Stone, the hopeful gleam which had shone in them

faded out, and her face became more wan and pinched than ever.

"I hope you won't mind, Miss Martin," Mrs. Stone commenced, "but if you could give me my money this morning, instead of this evening, I should be grateful. I haven't a bit of coal in the house, and if the child catches cold it will be its death."

Ruth put her hand into her pocket, and drew out her purse.

"It makes no difference to me," she said, faintly, but when she had once more closed her door she drew a long breath, and leaning up against the wall, began to tremble.

The fire was dying out in her grate, and not a scrap of wood or coal remained in the grimy chest.

"It *is* cold!" she murmured, "bitterly cold! No wonder the poor baby feels it. But Jack will come to-day. He will not forget—he will come to-day—he said he would."

It was well for Ruth at that instant that the privations she had undergone had to some extent

blunted the keenness of her wits, otherwise she could not have failed to recognize that there were many chances against Jack's going straight to the Langham Hotel on his arrival. These chances, however, did not occur to her benumbed brain. In her clearer moments she had made up her mind that he would go there, and she clung to the idea now with a tenacity that in all probability saved her from positive madness.

"Yes," she muttered, "he will come. I have only a few hours more to endure. I should not complain, and I will not. My life has been very peaceful hitherto. Why should I expect everything to be made smooth for me? I certainly deserve no more than others, and six months' unhappiness out of nineteen years is not much."

Taking down her shabby mantle from the hook on which it hung, she wrapped it closely round her.

"I will try and finish that painting," she thought. "It is no good to me, of course, now, but it will prevent my listening to every sound. When I heard Mrs. Stone coming up I thought it might have been my darling."

At twelve o'clock that night Ruth crept to her bed. Her eyes were dry, but there was a glowing red spot in the centre of each cheek, and her lips were parched and cracked. Folding her hands together, she moaned,—

“Oh, Father in Heaven, hear me! Let him come to-morrow. My trouble is too heavy for me. Let him come to-morrow, or my heart will break!”

The 22nd of December, the 23rd of December, the 24th of December—Ruth lived through them, wrapped in her mantle, and cowering under her blanket to prevent herself being frozen, occasionally forcing herself to swallow a portion of the dry loaf, and moistening her fevered lips with water; but Jack did not come, and now not one scrap of food remained. She was penniless, and in four days more she must turn out into the streets.

“There is no need for me to trouble about that,” she mused calmly. “In four days I shall be dead, unless I can get food and warmth. If Jack comes then, he will find me dead!”

Once more, under the agony of this thought, her enfeebled energies came to life.

"I will make one more struggle," she cried; "I will go to Mr. Pratt again. He may be repenting of his cruelty the other night. I can but try; I will offer him this picture. If Jack were dead I believe I should know it, and if he is alive he will come to me. I must be patient."

It was half-past six when Ruth started, and she was more than two hours walking to and from Mr. Pratt's, a distance of a little over two miles. She stayed there only five minutes, and from the doorway, watching her tottering steps, and noticing that every few yards she was forced to stop and recover her breath, the old man muttered to himself,—

"She's a fool, but she's a plucky woman. She doesn't look as if she'd had enough to eat lately; well, she'll have to give in. She won't starve herself altogether, but she'll come near to it. I shall have her here on Monday. She couldn't trust herself to look at the money to-night; there was a hungry gleam in her eyes when I held it out to her. She won't push my hand away on Monday."

The snow lay upon the ground, and the air was

keen and frosty, but the streets were thronged with a cheerful crowd, and the shops were brilliant with light and Christmas decorations. Many a time the starving girl had to stop because she could not push her way through the shouting, laughing people, who seemed determined to forget—at any rate, for this one night—that cold, and misery, and hunger, existed in the very midst of them. On Christmas Day, at least, they would feast and make merry; the rest of the week might take care of itself. It's a poor heart that never rejoices!

With terrible difficulty Ruth reached her home at length; and then, with many pauses for breath, she mounted the stairs, and, staggering into her room, bolted the door securely. The lamp was not alight, but the moon was bright, and shone into her wild eyes.

“There is no hope,” she panted, “none! I shall die in the night—my heart can hardly beat now. There is not a crust left, and I have eaten nothing to-day. If I wrote to my father he would not get the letter. She wants me to die, and I would rather die than buy my life at the expense of truth and

honour! He would give me work if I would consent to shut my eyes to dishonesty; but Heaven help me, I can't do that! I have no friends—not one——”

She stopped, and her breast began to heave convulsively,—

“There is Miss Harding,” she muttered; “if I told her I was starving, she would believe that I had some weighty reason for leaving my home; she might help me and keep my secret. Yes, I will write to her; it is my only chance of life. I will write, if I can hold a pen.”

She pulled herself out of the chair into which she had fallen, and gasping painfully, dragged herself half across the room; but before she could light her lamp even, a horrible sensation of numbing coldness began to creep over her.

“I am dying,” she moaned, “dying! Oh, God help me, this is awful! Kate, Kate, come to me! I am dying—oh, come to me!”

And then, with another piteous cry for mercy, she fell with a dull, heavy thud upon the floor.

CHAPTER VIII.

AT seven o'clock on Christmas Eve Jack Rathbone deposited his one trunk in the waiting-room at Euston, and then turned his face towards George Bartram's lodgings. The train for Liverpool was to start at ten, and on arriving there he intended going straight to the ship which lay in the docks, getting ready to start early on the 26th.

The two or three pounds that Jack had earned had enabled him to redeem from the pawnbroker's some of his clothes, and to pay one or two small debts that he had contracted; but his means went no further than that. Byron, however, was to meet him at Euston, and to pay his fare to Liverpool. On the voyage he could make shift to do without money, and on reaching Melbourne he had resolved to borrow sufficient for his absolute necessities from the friendly hotel-keeper, Thompson.

It was a sad hour that Jack spent with his poor friends. George Bartram had managed to hobble into the living room, but neither he nor Kate could keep up their spirits at all as the time of parting drew near. Jack had been a very mournful companion, it is true, but even in the midst of his own overwhelming trouble he had shown a ready sympathy with theirs, and the unfortunate George Bartram felt that life would be still harder when he no longer had that strong arm to lean upon in his painful walks to and from the hospital, nor that kindly attentive ear into which to pour his grievous difficulties.

This particular evening, too, it seemed that everything was at its worst with the Bartrams. Two nights before Mr. Pratt had returned Kate's work for alterations, and now she must wait until Christmas Day and Sunday had passed before she could hope to get any money.

There was a little food in the cupboard, certainly, sufficient to support life during the two days; but the Bartrams had always been used to keep Christmas, though in a very quiet way, and poor Kate

could scarcely restrain her tears to think that, just at the time her father needed extra comforts and care, his circumstances should be so terribly hard; and her misery was the greater because she could not forget she was herself the innocent cause of all his sufferings.

At length the absolute moment of parting arrived, and the eyes of the two men, even, were moist as they clasped hands.

“God bless you!” George Bartram said, brokenly; “God bless and help you! May things be brighter with us all when we meet again! You will come to see us, Mr. Thornton, directly you return, will you not? and if you should have any good news to send, you know there are two hearts here that will be the happier for getting it.”

“I am not likely to forget,” Jack replied; “thank you both for your true friendship and sympathy.”

He had shaken hands with Kate, and was already half way down the second flight of stairs when he stopped. A faint muffled cry smote upon his ears, and then the sound of a heavy fall, followed by a

shriek from Kate, and the noise of hands beating at a closed door.

Retracing his steps quickly, he found Kate Bartram and her father on the landing, the girl in a piteous condition of excitement and terror.

"What is it?" he cried. "What was that noise?"

"It is my friend, Miss Martin!" she gasped. "Oh, Mr. Thornton, help us, help us, something dreadful must have happened to her, I am certain of it! I heard her call my name, and her voice was fearful; she called my name, and cried out that she was dying, and then she fell. Mr. Thornton, for the love of God, don't leave us, our only hope is in you: father and I can do nothing for her!"

Placing his strong hand on hers, Jack strove to reassure the distracted girl.

"Don't agitate yourself like this," he said, soothingly; "you know you may rely upon me, I will not go while you have need of me, you may be sure. Now, what is it that I can do?"

"Help us to break that door open," Kate panted.

"Well, that oughtn't to be a difficult matter in an

old house like this," Jack said, quietly, throwing his cap into a corner of the landing, and squaring his shoulders resolutely; "the locks are pretty shaky, judging from that in your room. But are you sure it is necessary to take such an extreme measure as breaking open the door? Perhaps your friend could manage to unlock it even if she is ill."

"She is dead, I believe," Kate said, despairingly. "I have called to her, and I have hammered at the door, and she has not answered. There is no fire, too; if there were we could see the light of it through that wide crack. The room is in darkness, and she is lying there dead, or dying, in the cold, this awful bitter night!"

Hesitating no longer, pushing the sobbing girl gently out of the way, Jack clenched his teeth, and bracing himself up, took the handle in his fingers, and turning it, threw himself with all his force against the solid door. Once, twice, thrice, he repeated his efforts, and then he paused and turned his flushed face towards his anxious companions.

"It's strange," he said, breathlessly, "I can't make any impression on it; I used to be pretty

strong, I suppose I am not in good form just now. I should have thought any lock would give way under this."

With a cry of terror Kate interrupted him.

"There is no lock on that door!" she gasped ; "there are bolts at the top and at the bottom, great big bolts. Oh, Mr. Thornton, does that make it more difficult for us to get to her? Don't tell me so, we must get in. Do you hear, she is dying, and perhaps I could save her! Don't stop trying, for the love of Heaven! She would not have cried to me had she not been desperate. All this week she has shut me out, I who loved her, and who would have died to serve her! Oh, why are you waiting when every minute is of consequence? Let me come, I am weak, but my love will make me strong, no door shall keep me from her."

"Keep calm," Jack said, "I will do my best, do not fear, but you must let me have time to think; as for your trying, you will only tear and bruise your hands to no purpose. Keep quiet, we shall want your help further on; if you agitate yourself like this you will be useless when

the time comes, and you take the heart out of us too."

With a sob Kate sank on her knees by her father's side, and clung trembling to him.

"Forgive me," she said, "forgive me, I will be quiet and trust to you; you are good and brave, I know; you will not desert us in our trouble."

"Of course I will not," Jack responded, simply. "But it is useless our struggling with that door any longer. You showed me the hinges in your room, and if there are two heavy bolts six men could not break that door open. Now, Bartram, where are your tools?"

The man hung his head.

"I've thought of that," he said, gloomily, "but I pawned my tool chest last week."

"Then who has tools in this house?" Jack cried. "Let your daughter go and borrow a saw, and a large chisel, and a hammer, we must cut a hole in that door somehow."

Bartram uttered a groan of despair.

"This house is full of women," he said; "there's not a man here, but a bookbinder on the first floor,

and he has nothing of that sort, and Fred Stone, he's a journeyman tailor."

"Do you know any of the neighbours, then, who would help?"

"I know no one; I haven't a friend in these parts," was the hopeless answer.

Once more Jack threw himself desperately against the door, but the massive wood work did not even shake under his violent onslaught. With a moan of anguish, Kate ran into her room, and came out with her hands full of her delicate wood-carving implements.

"Are these of any good?" she asked, her face drawn and her lips quivering; "they are sharp, but there is no strength in them."

Jack seized the little tools, but before he could take a step George Bartram stopped him.

"For mercy's sake," he cried, "don't attempt to use those, they would break at once, they are only fit for soft wood, they would not be the slightest good in this case, and my girl will starve if you prevent her working!"

But Kate would not listen to her father; snatch-

ing the fine steel chisel from Jack's hands, she rushed at the door and struck madly at it. In an instant the chisel snapped and fell at her feet, and then the girl shrank back and stared at the two men with eyes distended with horror.

"What are we to do?" she wailed. "Oh, think, think—she is dying in there in the cold and dark without a creature to comfort her. Father, I shall go mad! Can you not propose something?"

"We must get help from outside," Bartram said. "If the people were not all so intent on their own business it would not be so difficult. We had better call in the police, and yet——" he paused, and his pale face flushed.

"And yet, what, father?"

"We do not know why Miss Martin wished to keep so much to herself," he continued; "we might be doing her a terrible injury by discovering her hiding-place to the police."

"Father!" Kate cried, "is it possible you can suspect her of anything that is not right?"

"I do not suspect her, Kate, but she may be unjustly accused by others as you were; at any

rate you cannot deny she begged you not to speak of her to any one, even to Mr. Thornton."

Jack looked from one to the other in great perplexity, but Bartram's words seemed to have affected Kate strongly, and she shuddered involuntarily.

"You are right, father," she faltered, "we must not do that. She has done no wrong I am sure, but innocent people have been punished before now. If it had not been for your good name I should have been in prison at this moment."

"We must get in without the police then, that is certain," Jack said, "but the question is how? We can make no impression on this door at all without proper tools, and with them we should be a long while cutting through this wood, it is as hard as iron. How about the window, Bartram, is it near the roof?"

"There are two, they must be pretty near," Barton replied, doubtfully, "but the roof is sloping, and there is no parapet at the back."

"That can't be helped," Jack responded, quietly. "Is there any way out on to the roof from here?"

"There is a trap-door above your head, there," Bartram said, pointing to the discoloured ceiling.

"And have you a good stout rope?"

"I have a rope that corded my big chest," Bartram answered, anxiously.

"Is it reliable? Would it bear my weight?"

"Your weight?" Bartram cried. "Good Heavens, Mr. Thornton, what do you think of doing?"

"I am going to let myself down from the roof to one of the windows, and to get into the room that way; we can't let a woman die within ten feet of us, and we can't hand her over to the police either, whether she's innocent or guilty. Now, Bartram, look alive with that rope. Have you a pair of steps up here? No? Well, then, we must have your table, and a chair on that, so that I can climb up to the trap-door.

Tearing off his coat and rolling up his shirt sleeves to the elbow, Jack ran into the Bartrams' room, and catching up the small deal table placed it under the trap-door, putting upon it a chair which

stood near. Then he mounted nimbly on the top and found that he could reach the trap easily; but the bolt was rusty, and it was five minutes before, having greased it, he could slip it back. Presently, however, it yielded to his powerful fingers, and he pushed open the trap-door, letting in a few lumps of frozen snow and a rush of icy wind, which threatened to extinguish the lamp Kate held.

"It's dry up there, that's a mercy," Jack said, "otherwise the leads would have been awfully slippery. Now, Bartram, hand up that rope."

Bartram held the black-looking rope towards the young man.

"It's a very perilous job, Mr. Thornton," he said; "think a minute. This girl has no claim on you that you should risk your life for her."

"Nonsense, Bartram," Jack answered, shortly; "a dying woman has a claim on every man who has a spark of courage in him. I shall be all right if the rope's sound. I have done a course of Alpine climbing; this is nothing to a glacier; the only

thing is the rope, it's lucky that I'm lighter than I was."

Passing the blackened rope carefully through his hands, Jack examined it foot by foot, before he coiled it loosely round his neck; and then mounting on the chair he scrambled through the trap-door, and lying upon the sloping roof, paused for a minute to recover breath.

The moon still shone brightly, and the blue dome of the sky was sparkling with stars, and as Jack lay there, the sounds of distant merriment and laughter came up from the busy streets; and listening to the cheery noise he wondered whether a sudden hush would have descended upon the crowd could they have known that within a few hundred yards of them there lay a forlorn woman, perishing of want and cold.

He only lingered for a minute, however; raising his head cautiously, he saw the stack of chimneys a few feet higher, and a couple of yards to the right of the trap-door; it took him only a few seconds to reach this point of vantage, and then, with the wind whistling in his ears and

blowing his rough hair about in every direction, he took his bearings carefully.

“The chimneys must be six feet to the right of the trap-door,” he thought; “and the trap was in a line with the door of the girl’s room. Where’s the window? that’s the question; not opposite the door, I trust. Let me see, though, Bartram said there were two windows in that room; in that case one of them would be not far off the partition wall dividing the houses, and therefore, nearly in a line with the stack of chimneys. That will do, then,” he continued, briskly; “if it’s tolerably near, I shall be able to work along the gutter, I dare say, for a foot or two.”

Unwinding the coil from his neck Jack measured it, and then examined the chimney-stack anxiously. Fortunately, as is the case in many old houses, the stack, though substantial was not very extensive in its dimensions, and when, with much difficulty, Jack had managed to get the rope round it, he found he had still a considerable length remaining.

His teeth chattering with cold, he took the end of the rope and knotted it firmly round his body under

the armpits; and then, not daring to look behind him lest his spirit should falter, he turned round and began gently letting himself down the roof, clutching the rope with a strong nervous grip, and pressing his knees and feet hard against the slippery surface.

For three minutes Jack descended, and then suddenly he caught his breath and clenched his teeth, for he found that there was no foothold, and he knew that he had come to the edge of a precipice with a sheer descent below it of sixty feet. His heart began to palpitate wildly, but his courage was still high. Throwing himself flat upon his chest, he wriggled gradually down and down, and presently with a horrible swaying motion, which for an instant turned him faint with giddiness, his body slid over the gulf, and with his elbows in the leaden gutter which ran along the edge of the roof he hung there for a moment, his feet scraping against the surface of the wall in search of any inequality which would afford him some sort of foothold and so ease his arms to a slight extent.

At length he uttered a smothered cry of thankful-

ness, for he felt his foot strike against a small projection, and venturing to look down for an instant perceived, to his unspeakable joy, that this projection was at the side of a window, and was, in all probability, a nail which had been driven into the wall by the occupant of the room.

The sill of this window, which he could see was wider than usual, was two or three feet only below the nail, but unfortunately it was a foot or so further to the left, and, therefore, to let himself down so as to get both feet on to it would be necessary to wriggle along the gutter for a yard or so.

With his foot planted firmly on the nail, the icy wind almost taking away his breath, Jack paused a minute to consider.

"It's an awfully difficult job," he thought, perceiving for the first time a new and what appeared to him an insurmountable difficulty. "I don't see my way out of it, and that's the truth. I could manage to shuffle along this gutter for a little way, but directly my elbows are free and I drop, as I must to reach the sill, the rope will swing me back to this spot again, and I shall simply be dangling against the wall.

The perspiration started on Jack's face, and his heart began to sink. The situation was indeed an awful one ; his arms were already trembling in a sickening manner, and he knew that only for a very few moments more he would be able to support the position, and yet when his muscles did relax and the rope should swing him back, it seemed to him that a terrible death would be inevitable.

In despair he raised his eyes, and then he uttered an exclamation of hope and relief.

About four feet to his left, just above the centre of the window in fact, he saw that there was a break in the outer edge of the leaden gutter. The edges of this gap were jagged and uneven, but Jack perceived at once that if he could get his rope into the fissure it would hold it in position while he let himself down upon the sill.

He murmured a prayer for strength, and then inch by inch he forced himself painfully onwards ; his shirt-sleeves were cut away by this time, and his elbows were bleeding, but they were completely numbed, and he was perfectly unaware of his injuries.

By the time he reached the gap his whole body shook as though a fit of ague were upon him, but he managed to place the rope, and increasing the speed of his actions, now that the goal lay so near, he ventured to remove his foot from the nail, and for the first time suffered his whole weight to depend upon the rope, which cracked and stretched alarmingly. It did not snap, however, and letting it slip through his fingers, with his feet pointing downwards, and his knees straightened, Jack strained towards the window-sill.

“It will only be for a moment now, thank God!” he thought, and then he came to a sudden stop with an indescribably awful sensation of dread. There was not another inch of rope at his disposal; even now it cut him severely under the arms, and yet the window-sill was at least half a yard beneath the tips of his feet.

For a moment he hesitated.

“I must cut the rope,” he said aloud, “and take my chance. That jagged edge up there would sever it in any case. I must cut it, and may God have mercy upon me!”

The breath hissed through his clenched teeth, but he did not delay. Thrusting his right hand into his pocket, still holding on to the straining rope with his left, he pulled out his large pocket-knife, and opening it with his teeth and commending his soul to God, sawed through the thick strands, and immediately afterwards dropped heavily upon the sill, and struck out madly at the window-panes.

There was an awful smash of glass; but though his arms and hands were cut and bleeding, Jack managed to cling to the wooden frame of the window through which he had thrust them. Battling for breath, groaning and gasping, he pushed back the bolts of the window, and then raising the lower sash, and summoning his utmost energies, he managed, by a supreme effort, to drop into the moonlit room.

For a few minutes, half fainting, the exhausted man lay where he had fallen, and then Kate's terrified cries and entreaties roused him, and dragging himself to his feet he cast his bewildered eyes around him.

At first he could see nothing clearly. It seemed to him that the room was pitch dark, and that in

the blackness there floated lurid balls of fire; but presently his brain grew calmer, and he was enabled to realize his surroundings, which each moment were more plainly revealed to him by the cold beams of the moon.

There was not a spark of fire in the grate, the cupboard stood open, and the shelves were bare. Upon the deal table was a plate with a few crumbs of bread on it; and between Jack and the door, upon the ground, there lay a black, motionless heap.

Panting heavily, he ran towards this heap, and dropped on his knees beside it. The woman had fallen face downwards, and as Jack laid his hand on the prostrate figure he could not discover the slightest movement of life in it. Then he began to tremble again.

"Heaven help her, poor soul!" he groaned. "It is too late; cold and hunger have done their cruel work."

Stooping, he lifted the slight form carefully, placed it upon the bed, and with an effort forced himself to look at the pallid, death-like countenance.

Then, suddenly, an awful scream of terror, which curdled Kate Bartram's blood as she stood outside the door, rang through the room, and throwing himself across Ruth's inanimate figure, Jack Rathbone covered her face with wild kisses, uttering incoherent cries of agony the while.

CHAPTER IX.

FOR a time the acuteness of Jack's despair deprived him of speech. Holding Ruth's marble cheek against his breast, he sobbed and moaned in utter misery; but at length his tongue was loosened.

"Ruth, Ruth, my darling! I have found you at last, but I have come too late—Heaven help me, too late! Oh, God pity me, give her to me again, or take me also. I cannot live without her. Have mercy, have mercy on us!"

And then, as if in answer to his piteous prayer, Ruth's white lips began to quiver slightly; a faint sigh fell upon her lover's straining ears, and lifting her heavy lids she gazed straight at him.

Ruth did not speak; it seemed that she was too

weak ; but Jack saw the light of a tender rapture struggle into the poor dim eyes, as, lifting her feeble hand towards his neck, she clung to him, and then lay motionless, her lips parted in a peaceful smile.

For a minute or so the reunited lovers remained in perfect silence, and then the discoloured eyelids closed again, the weak fingers relaxed their hold, and the arm fell back upon the bed.

Tenderly Jack laid her down once more, and rushing to the door, undrew the bolts and admitted Kate, who stood half-fainting, leaning against the wall.

“ God bless you, Kate ! ” he cried, in wild excitement ; “ God bless you, dear girl ! It is through you that I have found her. She is alive ; she shall not die. We will not let her, will we ? Go, Kate ; get coals and wood. We must warm her first ; she is half-frozen ; and then we must make her eat. You light the fire now.”

Her great brown eyes shining with joy, Kate rushed into the room. All along these two mysterious young people had had a curious affinity

in the romantic wood-carver's brain; Jack's wild shriek on recognizing her unfortunate friend had enlightened Kate in a moment; and there was no need for her to look into his face, or to listen to his words, to guess the whole truth. Her two friends loved each other and had been separated, and now they were reunited. Kate required no more than this to be perfectly happy.

Very soon a bright fire burnt in Ruth's grate, and Kate, with nimble fingers, arranged a huge sheet of thick brown paper over the upper part of the window.

"That will keep out the cold for to-night," she said, "and now we must wheel the bedstead to the fire."

"I will do that, while you get food," Jack cried. "In the first place we must pour some brandy down her throat."

With an exclamation of distress Kate interrupted him.

"We have none," she faltered, "nor any money either. Oh, Mr. Thornton, what shall we do?"

We have nothing but dry bread and cheese in our cupboard."

Jack thrust his hands into his pockets. There were some halfpence there, but nothing more.

"We can get a little brandy with this," he muttered; "but she must have proper food or she will die; and we must have a better fire than that."

"We have only a few more coals," Kate said piteously; "scarcely enough to keep it alight during the night."

"Then you must ask the other people in the house," Jack urged.

"They are awfully poor," was the miserable reply. "I doubt whether they have fire for themselves."

With a groan Jack ran out upon the landing and thrust his arms into his coat, noticing for the first time that his hands and shirt-sleeves were smeared with blood.

"I must wash my hands," he said, "or people will think I have been murdering some one. Then I'll go and get the brandy, that is the first thing.

I shall think of some way of managing the rest, don't you fear. It's past ten now, I suppose?"

"Yes, I heard it strike half-past ten a quarter of an hour ago."

"Then Byron will have started, so there's no getting help from him. Never mind; I'll find money somehow. Heap on the coals, Kate; look, there is a little colour coming into her dear face! The brandy will pull her round, see if it doesn't."

Jack ran into Bartram's room, washed his wounded hands, and then rushed to the nearest public-house, tearing back again with his small bottle of brandy.

Ruth's eyes were open when he entered the room, but he only stayed to see her swallow a little of the spirit, and then, kissing her gently, he ran down the stairs again, and gaining the main thoroughfare, hailed a hansom, and ordered the man to drive at full speed to an address which he gave him.

At half-past eleven Felix Dent was startled by a loud knocking at the street door of the house in which he lived.

It happened that he was the only person up, for the servant had gone to bed, and the landlord and his family had left home that afternoon; and sitting crooning over the fire, young Dent was about as wretched and forlorn as he well could be. It was the first Christmas he had not spent with his mother, and the tender, anxious letter that lay upon the table at his elbow added to his misery a hundredfold.

“Poor mother!” he thought. “If she only knew why I can’t go to her she would be as miserable as I am; but I couldn’t face her. She would see that there was something wrong at once. Shall I ever shake off this horrible incubus, I wonder? If not, what’s the good of life? If I only knew something, it would not be quite so bad. I deserve nothing, Heaven knows; but it is cruel of Jack Rathbone not to send me one word. She haunts me; I cannot sleep at night for thinking of her!”

He took up his mother’s letter again.

“Poor mother! And she thinks I am too ill to travel to Scotland, and she is worrying her dear

old heart over that. Well, perhaps it is better so——”

With a violent start, Felix Dent stopped.

“By Jove!” he muttered, “that’s a knock would wake the Seven Sleepers! It must be a mistake, of course.”

Again the knock reverberated through the silent house, and running to his window Felix threw it open and leaned out.

“Is that you, Dent?” an anxious voice called.

“Yes; who is it?”

“It is I—Jack Rathbone. Come to me at once!”

With an exclamation of astonishment, Felix rushed down the stairs, and unbolting the door, admitted Jack.

“What is it, Rathbone?” he cried. “For mercy’s sake tell me: is she found?”

“She is!” Jack answered, in great agitation, “but she is starving, Dent, and I haven’t a penny in the world.”

“And you have come to me for help, Rathbone? Heaven bless you for that!” the young man cried in

an ecstasy. "Come in, come in! tell me all about it! What can I do? I would sell the coat off my back—I would go barefooted—anything to prove to you how bitterly I repent!"

A quarter of an hour later the two young men came out of the house carrying between them a heavy hamper.

"We must stand it in front," Felix gasped. "Cabby will never get this on to the roof. Now then, Rathbone, up with it, while I go and fetch the other things."

In two minutes Dent came down again, his face flushed with his exertions. In his arms was an enormous bundle, which was tied with cords.

"Give me a hand, Rathbone," he said. "We must be careful, or the brandy and port wine will break—and there's the soup too. By Jove! I never thought mother's hamper would come in as useful as this! Bless her dear old heart for trying to coddle me up! I say, it's a good thing my landlord is away; he might have resented our visit to the coal-cellar, and all the shops are shut by this time. However, there's plenty in that hamper to

keep her fire going to-night, and those dear Bartrams too ; and if we can't buy more to-morrow, I'll make an arrangement with this cabby, and I'll bring the whole of my landlord's cellar in hampers' full. Oh, Rathbone, you can't think what a load you've taken off my heart ! I didn't deserve that you should come to me for help. You've heaped coals of fire on my head by doing so."

Jack grasped the extended hand, but he shook his head as he replied,—

"You needn't thank me, Dent. I am ashamed to say it was a bitter pill to me to apply to you ; but I couldn't let my darling suffer for my pride. If I had had twopence in my pocket I should have gone round to Euston and taken my trunk out of the waiting-room, and pawned everything I possessed ; but having bought a shilling'sworth of brandy, I had just a halfpenny left. I ran the risk of taking a cab. If you hadn't been at home, I suppose I should have had to fight the cabman, and after that I am inclined to think I should have picked a pocket !"

Felix pressed Jack's hand warmly, and his voice

trembled suspiciously, as, thrusting open the little trap-door in the roof of the cab, he urged the driver to increased speed.

Before the young men could jump out, Bartram opened the door of the house.

"I could do nothing up there," he said; "so I came down, that I might not keep you waiting."

"And how is she?" Jack cried.

"She is sensible—she shows that in her eyes—but she seems too weak to speak."

Leaving Felix to settle with the cabman, and to bring the hamper of coals with Bartram's feeble assistance, Jack caught up the huge bundle, and stumbling up the dark staircase, reached Ruth's room at length.

The girl lay back upon her pillows covered with Kate's blankets as well as her own. Her face was still as white as death, and though she moved her lips, no sound came from them; but her eyes were full of a pathetic happiness which caused an hysterical lump to rise in Jack Rathbone's throat.

Placing his bundle carefully on the ground, Jack

signed to Kate to untie the cords, and then leaning over Ruth, he smoothed the straying locks gently, murmuring tenderly,—

“We have found a friend, dear love, a good friend. Ruth, my darling, take heart; your troubles are over now!”

In a few minutes Kate had warmed some of the strong nourishing soup, and then, raising Ruth, Jack held her against his shoulder, and fed her as though she were a little child, while Kate looked on, tears of sympathy streaming down her cheeks.

At one o'clock a timid knock came to the door. Hastening to it Kate found Felix Dent.

“Tell me how she is?” he faltered. “We are so anxious, your father and I.”

Bidding him wait a minute, with a kindly nod of encouragement, Kate returned to the bedside.

“It is Mr. Dent,” she whispered; “he wants to know how you are, and he looks in such trouble, poor fellow!”

With a smile, Ruth raised her head from Jack's shoulder.

"Open the door," she said, faintly. Kate did as she desired, and beckoned to Felix to come nearer, and then Ruth held out her trembling hand towards him.

With a sob the young man ran to the side of the bed, and fell on his knees beside it.

"God bless you!" Ruth murmured, laying her hand on his bowed head, "God bless you, good friend! Do not grieve any more. Remember this, you have helped to save my life to-night. It is Christmas Day, is it not, dear?" she continued, looking into Jack's face.

"Yes, my darling, Christmas Day."

"Then," said Ruth, stretching her arms towards them all, "I wish every one as happy a Christmas as mine will be."

CHAPTER X.

ON the evening of the 30th of December, a peaceful little party were gathered together in Ruth's room. Ruth was still pale and thin, but there was a happy smile on her face, and her eyes were very placid and sweet. The room, too, thanks to Felix Dent, presented a most cosy appearance, comparatively speaking.

The young man had urged Jack strongly to remove Ruth from her poor lodgings, and to let him supply the means for more comfortable quarters, but Ruth would not hear of this. She made no difficulty about accepting Dent's help up to a certain point, for she knew that by doing so she was easing his mind of a terrible burden, and, moreover, she understood from Jack that there was a good prospect of his being able to repay Felix before very long; but she would not consent to one

farthing of unnecessary expenditure until this prospect became a certainty, and she declared to Jack that nothing would induce her to leave her present home while Kate and her father remained in poverty and distress.

“No, dear love!” she said, firmly; “when my ship comes home, it must bring fortune to them too. Jack, I could not love Kate better if she were my sister!”

But though Ruth was quite determined not to separate from Kate, she could not prevent Felix having her window mended, nor providing her apartment once more with carpet and curtains, and, in addition, a couple of luxurious easy-chairs, which caused the two girls, for whom they were intended, to laugh merrily, so utterly out of keeping were they with the rest of the poor furniture.

There were no secrets between Kate and Ruth now, and even Jack was not more horrified and infuriated than was the gentle girl when she heard how Ruth had been driven from her home; and Felix Dent, watching the young wood-carver's brown eyes sparkling with honest anger, came to

the conclusion that, pale and wan as she was, Kate Bartram's face was almost as beautiful in its way as Ruth's. It is certain no one else would have agreed in this opinion, but then it happened that Kate's eyes grew particularly soft whenever they rested on Felix Dent, she having an immense pity for the erring man who had repented so bitterly.

But on this 30th of December, though they were happy, they were very quiet and thoughtful, for Jack had announced to Ruth only an hour before, that, though it tore his heart to leave her even for a time, it was imperatively necessary that he should go to Australia. Two days previously a cable had come to the Regent Street Post Office, and this cable contained an even more peremptory summons than had the letter on the receipt of which he had applied to the steward of the *Stirling Castle*. The *Stirling Castle* was by this time well on its way, but another ship was to leave Liverpool on the second day of the New Year, and by this ship Jack decided to go, allowing Felix Dent to supply the means for his steerage passage, and for Ruth's support during

his three or four months' absence, out of a legacy which the young man had come into a few weeks before.

On his return to England, if the improved prospects of the gold-mine still continued, Ruth and Jack were to be married at once, and after that he determined that they would go together to 'The Lodge,' and, if necessary, force their way to the old Baronet's presence.

That Sir Richard Forrest had recovered from the serious attack under which he was labouring when Jack had his miserable interview with him he could not doubt, for Jack had made a point of examining the obituary notices each day, and considering the time which had elapsed since then, the young man was not inclined to share Ruth's suspicions of foul play in her father's case, since Arabella, had she desired it, had certainly had plenty of time to accomplish her deadly purpose between October, which was the month Jack arrived, and the end of the year.

With regard to Ruth's own case, too, Jack had suspected something of the truth; but Ruth and

Kate were quite indignant when he declared he believed Arabella's intention had been to frighten her out of the house, not to poison her ; nor could Ruth be persuaded to adopt a view which the three men believed to be the right one, which was that Jane Hunter had been Arabella's accomplice, and had conspired against her for the purpose of ruining her in her father's estimation.

It happened that, as usual, on this evening the conversation veered round to this point, and presently Ruth put up her hand, and said, with a half-sad smile,—

“Jack, don't let us talk any more about it ; we can't agree with you—can we, Kate ? I hope from my heart that you are right, for my poor father's sake ; but I own I am terribly afraid of his wife. I believe her to be thoroughly unscrupulous, and Herbert Westall too.”

“Ah,” Jack responded, taking her thin hand and kissing it tenderly, “I'll go as far as you like, my dear, with regard to Westall. I agree with you in thinking him an unmitigated scamp ; but although Lady Forrest no doubt is, as you say,

thoroughly unscrupulous as far as money goes, there's a wide difference between murder and avarice. Bartram, you've not seen this lady, but Dent has ; and I ask him if he thinks it possible a woman with a face like that could be so utterly callous and cruel ? ”

But Felix Dent objected strongly to being forced to take the opposite side to Kate and Ruth in any argument ; therefore he said nothing, and Bartram observed with a bitter sigh,—

“ I am inclined to think you are right in this matter on the whole, Mr. Rathbone ; but I can't agree with you that a woman's face is always an index to her mind. I've seen a face as innocent and beautiful as it is possible to imagine, and the woman that owned it had a heart as black as ink. A little creature she was, too, not as high as your shoulder, Miss Forrest, with golden hair, which glittered in the sunlight, and soft violet eyes that looked you straight in the face. This woman had an accomplice too—a slouching, black-browed, grim-looking man, with furtive, ferrety eyes that were always on the ground ; but of these two I have

always believed that the woman was the worst. What do you think, Kate?"

"I do not know, father," Kate murmured, colouring painfully under Felix Dent's questioning gaze; "she certainly gained my confidence, and decoyed me into the trap which ruined me, but I believe she did it for love of him. It is Hubert Mallet and his wife of whom we are speaking," she added in a low tone to Ruth.

"Oh, now I understand!" Ruth cried, excitedly, her face flushing and her eyes glittering feverishly; "these are the two dishonest cashiers that married, are they not? Do you know, at first your father's description quite took my breath away. My father's wife and her cousin came from Australia, and she is small and beautiful, with violet eyes and golden hair, and Herbert Westall is tall and ungainly, and cannot look you in the face."

Jack felt Ruth's hand begin to burn and tremble in his.

"You were right, my darling," he said, soothingly. "Let us talk no more about these people; we have not much time to spend with each other

now—let us think of pleasanter things. Come, lean your head back upon the chair again. Why, Ruth, you are not strong yet, with all Kate's care ! See how your hands are shaking ; we have tired you, my dear."

Ruth would not admit that she was tired, but Bartram broke into the conversation, and his tone was so singular that his daughter looked at him in astonishment. He had hobbled to the door while they had been talking, and now he stood half in and half out of the room. Kate could not see his face, therefore, but she could hear that his voice trembled with excitement.

"Mr. Rathbone, and Mr. Dent," he said, "come into my room and smoke a pipe. Kate, make Miss Forrest rest ; she must not overdo it. We won't be long away ; we will just smoke a pipe and have a little bit of a chat, and then we will come back."

Kate asked no questions, but without knowing why, her heart began to beat loudly. For Ruth's sake, however, she controlled herself, and her charge had just fallen into a quiet sleep when the

door was gently opened again. It was Jack, his face flushed, and his eyes gleaming.

Stealing across the room without disturbing Ruth, Kate whispered to him.

“She is asleep—do not wake her. She was over-agitated talking of those people just now. Am I wanted?”

Jack nodded, and with a glance over her shoulder to see that the invalid still slumbered, Kate closed the door softly and followed the young man across the passage into their comfortless sitting-room.

Bartram and Dent were not smoking; they were standing by the table, and their faces were as flushed and agitated as Jack's. On the table was a photograph album, and when Kate saw the page at which it was open an exclamation of annoyance and confusion escaped her.

Pointing to Ruth's closed door, Bartram silenced his daughter.

“Hush, Kate,” he whispered gravely, “she must not know what we have discovered. In her feeble condition it might well throw her into a fever.

Come here, my child, come here. Now tell us, who do those photographs represent."

"Hubert Mallet and his wife," Kate replied, breathlessly.

"And what do you say, gentlemen?" Bartram continued.

"That they are portraits of the woman who calls herself Lady Forrest, and Herbert Westall, her cousin," Jack announced, in muffled tones.

Kate staggered, and caught at her father's arm.

"Great Heavens!" she cried; "father, is it possible? But these two are man and wife; you saw them married yourself!"

"I did," Bartram replied; "and if it be as we suspect, these are the vilest wretches that ever breathed. If this portrait is really that of Lady Forrest, and both Mr. Dent and Mr. Rathbone have no doubt on the subject, the woman has committed bigamy, and the man is an accessory."

Kate sank into a chair in horror.

"But that is a crime, a dreadful crime, is it not?"

Bartram nodded grimly.

"Those two would hesitate at nothing," he said.

"But what is to be done?" Kate cried. "Father, this wickedness cannot be allowed to go on!"

"It shall not!" Jack interrupted, sternly; "but before we can take any decided steps we want your help, Kate."

"My help?"

"Yes; you see, we must be cautious, for the poor old man's sake. In the new light of this awful revelation I can easily believe these wretches would be capable of any atrocity. We must not frighten them if we can help it until we are perfectly certain of our position; and in order to verify our suspicions it is necessary that some one should recognize Hubert Mallet and his wife. We must make certain of their identity before giving information to the police, for, after all, photographs sometimes are misleading."

"And what do you propose?" Kate asked, with a shudder.

"That you should go to Polesworth to-morrow morning early with Felix Dent, and get to see these

people somehow," Jack answered, earnestly ; " even if they deny themselves to you, you must manage to do that, and I don't think there will be much difficulty about it, as they breakfast at nine in the winter, I remember, and you can look into the room easily from the garden. I would take you myself, but the gate-keeper would not admit me. I shall wait for you at the station, and if you confirm our doubts, you must then come with me and your father and tell what you know of this terrible couple at Scotland Yard."

Kate hid her face in her hands, and again she shivered nervously.

" You are not frightened, are you ? " said Felix Dent, leaning over her ; " you need not be. I know you must look upon me with contempt, Miss Bartram, but indeed you may rely upon me for protection here."

" It's not that," Kate faltered. " I have perfect faith in you, Mr. Dent ; but it is an awful business, and I am not so courageous as Miss Forrest. I will go, though ; I would brave fire and water to do her a service."

It was scarcely light when Felix and Jack drove up to the door the next morning, but Kate was ready.

The station clock pointed to ten minutes to nine when the train drew up at Polesworth.

Twenty minutes later, Dent and his trembling companion stopped at the closed gates of 'The Lodge.' Drawing Kate's hand through his arm, the young man bent his head and whispered a few encouraging words to her, and then he braced himself up and rang loudly.

The wife of the gate-keeper, who came bustling out, recognized Dent at once, and having heard strange rumours connecting him with Ruth's disappearance, opened her eyes in astonishment.

"Mr. Dent!" she cried, glancing curiously at Kate. "Who would have thought of seeing you? Why, you haven't been here for months!"

"I know that, Mrs. Morris," Felix answered, stoutly; "but I want to see Lady Forrest. Is she down?"

"Yes; she's at breakfast with that Mr. Westall."

"And how is Sir Richard?" Dent asked, pressing Kate's hand reassuringly against his side.

“Oh, he’s in a very bad way,” the woman answered, gravely. “Lady Forrest is getting regularly worn-out. She’s lost all her pretty colour, and her eyes look quite wild sometimes with want of sleep; but she won’t trust him to a nurse. She’s wonderfully good to the old man—she really is. There! Every day, the first thing when I open my door, I goes up the drive until I can see the house, expecting the blinds will be down; but he lingers still. She fights death for him, that’s what she does!”

Even Felix Dent could not restrain a shudder as they turned away, and Kate, leaning heavily upon him, groaned out,—

“It is awful, is it not? This woman must be a positive fiend! I believe she is killing that poor old man by inches! Heaven grant we may be in time to save him!”

CHAPTER XI.

MRS. MORRIS certainly had not exaggerated the alteration in Lady Forrest's appearance, and that morning, when Herbert Westall, or, as he must now be called, Hubert Mallet, came in, cold and thoroughly ill-tempered, he exclaimed peevishly, when his eyes encountered the haggard, faded face,—

“Confound it all, Belle! don't stare at me like that! Your eyes are getting like saucers! For goodness' sake make an end of this business! If you don't, I warn you you'll never get back your looks again. A woman at five-and-twenty can't play tricks with herself.”

“Am I so very changed, then?” she asked, looking wistfully at the frowning ugly face opposite to her.

“You're awfully changed!” he answered, viciously. “I should scarcely recognize you for the

same woman. You used to be as pretty a little creature as one could wish to see—now you are right-down *passée*, and you'll continue so if you don't take care."

"What can I do?" she muttered, wincing and flushing. "I get no sleep, and my whole life is a perfect torture to me."

"It's your own fault if it is!" was the brutal answer. "You will fight shy of the final *coup*, Brace yourself up to that, and the whole thing will be over in a few hours."

"He has been dying for the last fortnight!" she answered, breathing quickly. "Bertie, surely we can wait a few days longer?"

"Who says he has been dying?" Mallet interrupted, savagely.

"Dr. Saunders. Every day when he comes he expects to find him dead; so I have waited. Oh, Bertie, if he would only die naturally!"

Hubert Mallet rose and laid his hand on the cowering woman's shoulder.

"Listen to me, Belle," he said, slowly. "This must come to an end—to-day—at once—now! Dr.

Saunders is a fool, as you know perfectly well. The old man may linger for months, and if he lasts another week you'll be down with brain-fever. Jane tells me you have taken to talking and muttering to yourself. That won't do at all, my dear. Now, when does Sir Richard have his next cup of broth, or whatever it is ? ”

“ He has a glass of milk in about ten minutes. I'll take it to him,” the wretched woman replied, shading her eyes.

“ Well, where is it ? ”

“ On the sideboard ! ”

Without a minute's hesitation the man crossed to the sideboard, and returning, placed the milk upon the table.

“ Now,” he said, coolly, “ where's the stuff ? ”

Arabella pointed to the *escritoire*. Quickly Mallet pressed a spring, and immediately a secret drawer sprang open. Inside was a bundle of bank-notes, and underneath them a small, carefully-folded packet of white paper.

“ I'll help myself to some of these while you are upstairs, Belle,” he said, coolly indicating the bank-

notes, "but now I'll just mix this draught, as you've turned squeamish all of a sudden. That's the worst of you women; you are all right up to a certain point, but it's impossible to depend upon your going through with a thing."

His accomplice did not reply, but when she heard the paper rustle as he opened it, she began to tremble violently.

Mallet emptied the packet into the glass of milk, stirring it carefully, and then he tossed the paper into the fire, and, leaning on the mantel-shelf, watched it consume in the bright flames.

"There!" he said, "that's done with. He's got all there was in the packet. We must make sure of it this time, at any rate. Now, all you have to do is, as usual, to wash the glass when he has finished the contents, and afterwards to put a little fresh milk into it."

He waited an instant for her to answer, but she did not speak, and glowering angrily at her, he strode to her side.

"Why don't you take your hands from your face?" he asked, roughly. "Are you going to do

as I say, or shall I pay the invalid the attention of carrying up his refreshment myself? I will do so if you can't; but if you haven't turned altogether idiotic, you will see it will be much safer not to excite the servants' curiosity just now."

With a groan she dropped her hands in her lap, and raised her ghastly face.

Then, to his amazement and alarm, Mallet saw a sudden access of terror come into the despairing eyes, as with an ungovernable shriek, Arabella sprang to her feet and clung to his arm, quivering in an agony of fright.

"There, there! see there!" she gasped, pointing wildly to the window.

Hubert Mallet followed the direction of her extended hand, but there was nothing to be seen.

"What do you mean?" he cried, shaking her roughly. "Can't you speak, Belle? Have you gone mad already?"

"I saw her!" she panted; "I saw her plainly looking in at us! Bertie, I may be changed, but she knew us both."

"Who knew us?" the terrified man asked frantically.

"Kate Bartram. Bertie, we are lost—we are lost! Bartram was in the church when we were married. They will be revenged at last!"

Throwing her violently from him, with an oath the man rushed to the window. A dozen yards from him stood Kate Bartram and Felix Dent. For an instant they remained staring solemnly at him, and then Dent drew his shuddering companion rapidly forward, and in another moment they disappeared quickly, a bend in the avenue of elms hiding them from sight.

When Mallet turned to his wife again, his face was as white as hers—his thick, sensual lips even were pale and quivered with fear.

"We have reached the end of our tether," he muttered, hoarsely. "There is no doubt of that; it's all up—we must go!"

"Yes, yes; we must go," she repeated, blankly; "we must go, of course."

With another oath he rushed to her side, and

clutching her arm tightly, caused her to utter a feeble groan of pain.

"Listen to me, Belle!" he cried, in muffled tones. "Pull yourself together, do you hear? The worst has happened to us that could happen. Felix Dent was with that girl, and there's no doubt the police are not far off. There's the Melbourne business they want us for, besides this affair. We can't get away by train; it wouldn't be safe to go into the road even."

With a heavy sigh, as though some terrible crushing weight lay upon her which she had not the physical strength to throw off, the woman raised her distracted eyes to his.

"What can we do, then?" she moaned; "what can we do, except drown ourselves in the river? That would be better than being taken."

With a string of curses, the man dragged the trembling creature to her feet.

"You can drown yourself if you like," he muttered, savagely; "but I mean to make a struggle for it. Now, then, can you attend to what I say? We haven't a moment to spare; at any minute they

may come back, and if we are caught it is penal servitude for years."

She nodded her head, but there was a distraught gleam in her eyes which terrified her cowardly accomplice. Turning from her, he ran to the *escritoire*, and seizing the notes, counted them quickly, then grinding his heel into the ground, he muttered to himself,—

"Only sixty-five pounds! There's not enough here; if there was I'd leave her! She'll be an awful drag upon me unless her brain gets clearer than this."

Stuffing the notes into his breast-pocket he came back to the miserable woman, who still stood where he had left her, supporting herself against the table, gazing blankly in front of her.

"Belle," he said, leaning over her and constraining himself to speak more gently, "I am sorry I was so rough just now, but I am anxious for you, don't you understand? Don't lose heart, little woman; we are not beaten yet! Now, Belle, rouse yourself, and attend to me."

Sighing piteously, she passed her hand over her forehead, and fixed her meaningless gaze on him.

"I'll try," she murmured. "Be patient with me, Bertie; I'll try to understand, only I am so tired!"

Controlling his fury, the man took her wandering hands in his, and whispered,—

"You have the key of Sir Richard's safe in your pocket, Belle?"

"Yes," she said; "since he took to his bed I have always carried it in my pocket—that and the key of the jewel-case."

"That's right!" Mallet answered, encouragingly. "When I told you to take them from the bunch I was providing for this emergency. Now, Belle, come with me into the library—but first, have you a cloak and hat down here?"

"Yes; my fur cloak is in the hall, and my garden hat is there, I think."

"Put them on, then," he continued, leading the way. "If the servants see you, you can say you are going down with me to look at the ice on the river—that I have persuaded you to take a little fresh air."

But no one was in the hall, and in another minute

the guilty pair entered the library, Mallet locking the door behind them.

"Now," he said, harshly, "you know what you have to do, don't you?"

"Yes," she answered, more collectedly; "I am to open the safe and take out the jewel-case."

"That's it," he replied, hurriedly. "I'd wait with you, but I've other work to do. Get out the case as quickly as you can, and then follow me to the boat-house. You understand me?"

"Yes, yes; I understand, I understand!" she answered, feverishly. "It seems to me that I have been asleep, and am just waking up. Go, Bertie; I will be with you in two minutes."

Unbolting the window, the man threw it open, and then he ran swiftly across the lawn in the direction of the shrubbery. But Hubert Mallet's wretched wife was longer in executing her share of the business than she had anticipated. To get at the jewel-case it was necessary to take out of the safe several heavy pieces of plate, and her hands being almost paralyzed with terror, it was some minutes before she could accomplish this.

When at length she reached the boat-house, the boat was already afloat, and Mallet stood upon the path, grinding his teeth and stamping his feet in an extremity of rage and impatience. Seeing his wife he rushed forward.

"Give me the case!" he cried, with a fiendish gleam in his eyes. "Quick, give it to me!"

But the woman, clutching it more tightly, shrunk away from him.

"No," she panted, "I will not give it to you, Bertie, I am afraid of you! You look like a devil! I can't trust you; I believe you would be brute enough to leave me if you could. Don't touch me!" she continued, wildly; "don't touch me, or I'll scream for help! Now stand out of the way, and let me get into the boat."

With a muttered curse the man drew back, while Arabella stumbled into the boat, and then, with a terrified glance over his shoulder, he jumped in himself, and seizing the oars, began to push off from the shore.

"Take the rudder-lines," he said, his teeth chattering with fear, "and steer carefully. Con-

found this east wind! It's enough to cut one in half."

For half an hour Hubert Mallet bent to his work, straining every sinew, and groaning heavily from time to time; and then he drew the oars in and passed his coat-sleeve over his heated face.

"I must rest a minute," he panted. "I am not in training for this sort of thing. How much did you say those diamonds are worth?"

"Four thousand pounds—at least, that is what Macintyre valued them at," she replied, shivering with cold.

"Well, we shan't get that, or near it; but what we've got to think of now is keeping out of the hands of the police. If you had only done as I told you," he muttered, "we should have had the old man's money by this time, and we could have bought Kate Bartram's silence. Felix Dent, we know, wouldn't have refused money. It's all your fault, d——n you!"

She did not reply, but presently, when he had resumed rowing, she said, drearily,—

"And what are we going to do, Bertie?"

"I must row on for three or four miles, and we must go ashore in that little wood near N——. From N—— we can take the train to Tibberly, and stay there for a couple of days. The chances are, even if they have already discovered our flight, that they will only watch the trains up to town. During that couple of days we can make our plans."

The woman became silent again, but by-and-by she gave a violent start, which caused the boat to rock dangerously.

"Bertie!" she cried, the wild gleam reappearing suddenly in her eyes, "we've forgotten Jane, and we've also forgotten the glass of milk!"

Mallet shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"It can't be helped," he said. "Jane must take care of herself. Nobody knows that she has been mixed up in this affair."

"But Kate Bartram will recognize her as your sister!"

"Oh, well! Jane must take her chance, I tell you!" he responded, harshly. "I can't afford to think of her now; and as for the milk, if the old

man gets it after all, we can't help it. I am not going to bother myself about that. If I had had my way, he'd have been out of his misery long ago."

"Jane hasn't a penny in the world!" his wife replied, clasping and unclasping her hands. "I meant to have given her some to-day."

Hubert Mallet laughed a cruel laugh.

"It's a good thing you didn't, my dear," he said, "for we've none too much for ourselves. Now then, Belle, we turn in here. Come, wake up! What are you thinking about?"

"I am thinking about that stuff in the glass," she muttered, glaring at him. "I wish we had poured it away before we started. His death is no good to us now. I didn't hate him as you did, Bertie! He wasn't a bad man, and I believe he was fond of me. I wish I had poured it away—I wish I had poured it away!"

Hubert Mallet bent towards his companion, and looked uneasily into her face.

"Don't think any more about it!" he said, in trembling tones. "We have ourselves to con-

sider now; Belle, for my sake, pull yourself together!"

She shook her head, and fixed her ghastly eyes on his.

"Help me, Bertie!" she moaned; "help me! I don't know what's the matter with me! I can see your face, but all around is as dark as night. Your face shines out like a white spot against a black curtain! Oh, Bertie! I am frightened—I am frightened! Tell me what to do; I cannot think for myself! Be good to me—oh, be good to me! I did it for you—all, all for you! You are a bad man, Hubert Mallet—a bad man! Nobody knows it better than I—and yet I loved you——"

Here her ramblings came to an abrupt stop. Their frail craft had come into contact with a block of ice which was drifting with the swift current; and the woman uttered a wild shriek of terror as the boat oscillated so violently that it was with difficulty they kept their seats at all.

Looking anxiously around, Mallet then perceived, to his intense dismay, that, in order to reach the shore, they would be compelled to thread their way

through a number of these blocks of ice. It happened that the grounds of 'The Lodge' sloped down to the water's edge in the form of a small bay, and that this bay was sheltered to a great extent. Therefore, while the more exposed portions of the river were frozen in many places, the couple had had no difficulty in starting on their perilous journey, although on the opposite shore, which caught the full blast of the winter wind, they could see the ice tumbling in the water and sparkling in the rays of the morning sun.

At once it was obvious to the terrified man that, unless the boat were carefully steered, it would be absolutely impossible to gain the shore in safety, and he groaned aloud, and his forehead grew moist as he looked into his companion's glittering eyes.

"Belle," he faltered, taking her burning hand in his clammy fingers, "Belle! don't be frightened, little woman! We are all right — don't be frightened! Take the rudder-lines again; you know how to steer. Come, come! rouse yourself, Belle! We must turn in to the shore here, I tell

you, and you must steer the boat through this ice. We are quite safe so long as you keep cool. Let us get to the shore as quickly as we can, and then I will get a little brandy for you. You are perished with cold, my dear—that's what's the matter with you."

But she paid no heed to his earnest words; looking past his shoulder, she continued to glare blankly into space.

"You are hard on me, Bertie," she murmured, "very hard. He will die if we only give him time! I know I said he should be dead before the New Year. Well, perhaps he will; there are two days yet. Let us wait until the New Year, Bertie—let us wait until the New Year—let us wait——"

Her voice died away into a plaintive moan, but still she gazed fixedly beyond his shoulder.

With a shudder, the man drew back and stared hopelessly at her. There was no doubt about it now; the awful fire of insanity burnt in those distended violet eyes. Clenching his teeth, he sat for a moment in deep thought, steadying the boat as well as he could with the oars, and then pulling

them in once more, he stooped down, and unlacing his boots, drew them quickly from his feet, tying the laces together, and hanging them round his neck afterwards.

"I shall have to swim for it, I expect," he muttered to himself. "Well, I daren't take off my coat; I couldn't get another safely. It can't be more than a quarter of a mile to the shore, though; I ought to be able to manage that easily. Now then for the case!"

Leaning forward, Hubert Mallet placed his hand gently on his companion's arm.

"Belle," he said, "let me take care of the jewel-case now, my dear. You will want both your hands for the lines."

She made no answer. It was quite apparent that his words had not the power to penetrate the dense obscurity of her brain. For a moment more he hesitated, and then his hand stole stealthily under her fur cloak, and he laid his covetous fingers on the metal handle of the leather case.

With a shriek she clutched it tightly to her, and struggled to her feet.

“Let go, let go, Bertie!” she screamed. “You shan’t have it—you shan’t have it, I tell you! While I have this I am safe—you can’t do without me!”

Gnashing his teeth in a transport of rage, the man tore and pulled at the case, utterly reckless of the fact that each movement on their part threatened to overturn the boat altogether; but the woman’s was the strength of madness, and against that the brute force of the man could not prevail.

“Give it to me—give it to me, you fool!” he cried. “Give it to me, or take the consequence!”

“I’ll not give it to you!” she gasped. “I know you now, Hubert Mallet—I know you now! I was a fool while I loved you, but I am a fool no longer! I can see it in your eyes; you want to get rid of me. But you can’t do without me while I have this. No,” she continued, with a ghastly laugh, “the diamonds are my best friends. My husband will not desert me while I have them!”

They stood for a moment perfectly still, gazing into each other’s eyes, and then, with a deadly im-

precation, the ruffian made one more effort to snatch the case from her clutch ; but though his iron grasp was round the handle, he could not succeed in drawing it away from her.

Glancing over his shoulder, he saw that the boat had drifted a few yards nearer the shore.

“Very well, then !” he panted, hoarsely, “take the consequences ! You will leave go quick enough in a minute !”

And then, without a glimmer of compunction, he threw himself on one side, and in an instant the boat sank under their feet, and the two guilty wretches were struggling in the water.

As Mallet had anticipated, the unhappy woman’s grasp relaxed at once under this shock ; but, being a skilful swimmer, he was able to retain his hold on the somewhat heavy case, and rising almost immediately to the surface of the water, he contrived to keep himself afloat with one arm, while he looked nervously around him.

The boat was floating bottom upwards a dozen yards from him, but no sign could he see of his miserable wife.

Heaving a sigh of relief, the callous creature muttered,—

“Well, she brought it upon herself! Besides, what could I have done with a mad woman upon my hands? She is as well off now as she would have been in quod.”

Lifting the case, he grasped the handle firmly with his strong, big teeth, and, with both arms at liberty, struck out powerfully for the shore. Half-a-dozen strokes he took, then he suddenly stopped, and a look of horror came into his cruel eyes. He felt clinging arms around him, and a moment later his wife’s white face appeared upon the surface of the water.

The heavy fur cloak had slipped from her shoulders, and Mallet felt his strength oozing away as she twined her arms around him.

“Save me!” she panted. “Oh, Bertie, save me! You shall have all—everything—only save me!”

He did not speak, but there was that in his eyes which froze the blood in her veins.

“Great God!” she shrieked; “Bertie, you do not mean—no, no, you cannot mean——”

She stopped, and the monster, slowly raising his hand, clenched his fist, and dashed it into the terror-stricken face.

There was one muffled scream, and then wide circles appeared upon the blue shining water, and the murderer, looking around again, could see nothing but the tossing, rocking blocks of ice, and the floating boat.

His breath hissing through his teeth, once more he struck out for the shore, but he had not proceeded a dozen yards before, with a groan, he turned over on his back to rest himself by floating. Of a sudden it seemed to him that his strength had deserted him. Having dealt that dastardly blow, a horrible sensation of numbness had come into his arms.

He allowed himself only a moment to rest, however. At once he perceived the danger of inaction in that icy water.

"I must push on," he thought, his heart thumping wildly in his breast. "I shall do it in time; it is the ice in the water which numbs my arms. I can't be twenty yards from the shore now—I, who

used to think nothing of swimming a couple of miles over yonder ! ”

But, whatever he had done in the old days, the exhausted man was beaten now. An excruciating pain seized him, paralyzing his legs, and causing his lower jaw to drop.

Noiselessly the leather case slipped into the water and sank, but the horrified wretch gave no thought to the preservation of that for which he had committed murder. His own hour was come, and he knew it. Within a stone's throw, so near that he could see the frost glittering on the blades of grass, lay the shore ; but he had seen swimmers drown from cramp more than once, and he knew that no help could come to him.

For three minutes his mortal agony lasted, and then, with a terrible shriek, that was heard half a mile away, the ruffian gave up his frenzied struggles for life, and the inexorable river closed over his wicked head.

CHAPTER XII.

IN less than three hours later, John Rathbone and a detective from Scotland Yard stopped at the gate which admitted to the grounds of 'The Lodge.' Pulling the bell, they waited for a minute, but no one answered their summons, and unfastening the side-gate, they walked in.

Before they reached the house they distinctly heard the sound of loud, agitated voices, and running on in front of his companion, Jack saw that the hall-door stood open, and that a group of frightened servants surrounded a rough-looking man, whose face appeared to be blanched and drawn with terror.

Perceiving Jack, Brown, the valet, uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Mr. Rathbone!" he cried; "thank God you're come, sir! Something awful has happened here,

and we don't know what to do, or who's to tell the master ! ”

“ What is it ? ” Jack inquired, breathlessly, while the detective examined keenly the agitated faces on all sides.

“ The first we knew, sir,” Brown continued, brokenly, “ was that while we were finishing breakfast we saw Jane Hunter run out of the house the back way with her bonnet and shawl on, and with a very scared face. That made us wonder, for she was always left in charge of Sir Richard while my lady breakfasted. But when I got to the dining-room there was no one there.”

“ Well, Brown ? Go on—go on ! ”

“ I went up to Sir Richard then, sir, but he was asleep ; and neither my lady nor her cousin were there either. I came down again, and noticed that my lady's fur cloak was gone from the hall. I tried the library door, sir, but it was locked, and I could get no answer. That alarmed me, and I went in through the window. The place was all in disorder ; the safe stood open, and a lot of the plate was on the ground. Sir Richard kept Miss Ruth's mother's

jewel-case there, at the back of the safe, sir; but there's no jewel-case there now."

"Great Heavens! they have gone, then!" Jack cried, "and taken the diamonds with them. Come, Best," turning to the detective, "there's no time to be lost. Those diamonds were worth some thousands, I know."

But before the shrewd-looking detective could stir a step, Brown laid a shaking hand upon his coat-sleeve

"Wait a minute," he faltered. "Now, Fenton, tell what you saw and heard."

The rough-looking man stepped forward and touched his forelock.

"I was on the river, gentlemen, about four miles from here. I saw a boat being rowed towards me, and I thought it queer as people should go out in a pleasure-boat such a day as this. There was a man and woman in the boat, and her hair was bright golden—the sun gleamed on it. I watched them for a bit, and then I had my own business to attend to, I had to look out sharp for the lumps of ice. But presently I heard a shriek, and I saw that

the man and woman were standing up in the boat struggling for something. In a minute the boat went over, and they were both in the water. I didn't wait, you may be sure, but pulled with a will towards them, but the water was very heavy and lumpy and the tide agin me; and before I could get round the bend of the river I heard another yell, and the sound was awful—it took away my breath!”

Fenton paused a minute to moisten his parched lips, and his voice trembled as he continued,—

“When I reached the spot at last there was no sign of either of them, and the boat was drifting with the current. I saw it was one of Sir Richard Forrest's pleasure-boats. I got a line on to it, and I towed it ashore here. That's all I know about the matter, gentlemen; but them two as was in that boat is drowned dead, as certain as we all stand here!”

A silence fell upon the shuddering group, and Jack, staggering into the dining-room, sank into a chair.

The breakfast-table was just as the guilty pair

had left it, and at once the detective's keen eye fell upon the tumbler of milk, which stood upon the table on a little silver salver.

"What is this?" he asked.

The valet Brown started.

"It's Sir Richard's glass of milk," he responded.

"My lady always took it to him a little before ten."

"You are sure this was intended for Sir Richard Forrest?" the detective asked again.

"I am certain of it," the footman replied; "that's Sir Richard's special tumbler."

"Ah!" the detective said, thoughtfully, with his hand upon the glass; "and were you in the room all the time this lady and gentleman were at breakfast?"

"No," the man answered; "when my lady and Mr. Westall were alone I never waited on them."

Best considered a moment, and then, turning to Brown, he said,—

"Fetch me a bottle and a funnel; I wish to preserve this milk."

Brown looked up quickly, and his pale face grew a shade whiter as, with an emphatic nod of the

head, he left the room to do the detective's bidding. But when the assembled servants saw Best begin to pour the milk carefully into the bottle a frightened buzz of conversation arose among them, on which the detective raised his head and addressed them sharply.

"Listen to me!" he said. "There must be no talking here, do you understand? Your master is very ill, I hear. Well, I don't know in what estimation you hold him or his daughter, but gossip about this terrible business would be very painful to them, and might be dangerous to Sir Richard."

The murmur ceased immediately, and the valet stepped forward.

"We won't talk, sir," he said. "We respect Sir Richard highly, and we one and all love Miss Ruth."

The detective nodded approvingly.

"Now," he said, "who is with Sir Richard?"

"Mrs. Evans, the cook," the valet replied. "She has been here ever since Sir Richard's first marriage, so when we didn't know what to do she offered to go up to him."

"What has she told him—do you know?"

"She told him that my lady was taken faint and could not go to him for a bit," Brown answered, shuddering.

Best crossed to where Jack sat.

"Are you better?" he asked, lowering his tone.

"Yes; I am ashamed to have been so weak!"

"You needn't be ashamed, it takes some time to get case-hardened to this sort of thing. But you must pull yourself together now. You must go up and see that unfortunate old man. If I were you I wouldn't say anything about the poison—that is only a suspicion at present, but, for our own satisfaction, I shall have that milk analyzed—nor should I tell him now about the former marriage; that could come out afterwards if you think fit. You see, none of these folks know that, and for the daughter's sake I should be inclined to hush it up."

Jack murmured his thanks, but before he reached the door of the room he heard Best's voice raised again, this time in tones of sharp command.

"Where can we get drags to drag the river?" he said, addressing Fenton.

"At N——," was the reply; "four miles up the river from here. They were close upon N—— Wood when the boat upset."

"Very well, then; we must get to N—— as quickly as possible. You must come with us, Fenton, to show us the spot. Now, you servants, bustle about your work. It will prevent your thinking about this too much."

Jack waited until Best and Fenton had left the house and the whispering servants had dispersed, and then, with a sinking heart, he slowly ascended the stairs.

The grey-headed old servant lifted her eyes anxiously when Jack entered the darkened room, but at sight of him a cry of relief escaped her, hearing which, the unfortunate Baronet, whose face was turned towards the window, raised his feeble voice.

"Ah, so you are better, Belle?" he said. "But you should have rested longer. I don't want to keep you tied to me, my dear. I only get impa-

tient when I know you are with him. I don't like him, Belle; I wish he wasn't here so much."

He waited an instant, and then he continued peevishly,—

"Why don't you come here, where I can see you, Belle? You needn't be offended at my speaking of Herbert before Mrs. Evans. Mrs. Evans is an old friend—a good old friend! She was with me before Ruth was born. She didn't expect any more than I did that Ruth would have deserted me in my old age, and poor Jack Rathbone too."

The old man's quavering voice died away in a sigh, and his eyes closed as though the effort to speak had exhausted him.

Much affected, Jack advanced, and gently touched the wrinkled hand which lay outside the silken coverlet.

Sir Richard opened his eyes and stirred uneasily in his bed.

"Jack Rathbone," he cried, feebly, "I was just thinking of you, of you and Ruth. But is not my wife with you? Why does she stay away?"

Jack shook his head, and with a gesture signed to the old woman to leave them. The Baronet passed his handkerchief across his dim eyes, and then, perceiving the gravity and whiteness of Jack's shocked face, he managed to pull himself up in his bed.

"What have you come to tell me?" he panted. "Something bad, I can see! Is Ruth dead?"

"No, thank God!" Jack answered, fervently. "She is safe, and will soon be well, I hope. We have both done Ruth a cruel injustice, sir!"

The Baronet clutched at Jack's shoulder.

"What is it, then? I will hear about Ruth afterwards. What is it? Where is Lady Forrest—why doesn't she come to me?"

Jack hesitated, and the old man continued wildly,—

"Was that true about the fainting fit, Jack Rathbone? Has she been ill, or is she with him? Ah, you don't understand me; you don't know—nobody knows—what tortures I have suffered about that man! Great Heavens! She hasn't run away from me, has she?"

Then turning his eyes away, that he might

not witness the old man's agony, Jack told him part of the truth; and when the unhappy Baronet fell back fainting upon his pillows the young man realized the full wisdom of the detective's warning. Sir Richard imagined his wife had robbed him and had eloped with the cousin he had so long hated in secret, and that they had met with an awful and prompt punishment for their crime; but had he known the terrible truth, the degradation and shame of the revelation must have killed him.

Dr. Saunders was called in haste, and it was some hours before the crisis was passed; but towards evening Jack was called from the dining-room, where he sat in company with Mackintyre and the old doctor.

"He's awake, sir," Brown whispered, "and he wants to see you, Mr. Rathbone—not the other gentlemen, only you."

Poor Sir Richard clasped Jack's hand when he seated himself by the bedside.

"I haven't died, Jack," he said, with a grievous sigh. "Nobody does who wants to, it seems to me.

Jack, if, six months ago, when Ruth went away from me, I had never recovered the shock, those two would have been spared their crime. I lived too long for them—that was what it was. I was a doting old fool! She never cared for me; it was this other man she loved all along.”

Jack pressed the quivering hand gently.

“I am afraid you are right, sir,” he replied, gravely. “I believe that this wretched woman has been false to you from the beginning!”

Then, gently, and with the utmost consideration, he told of the persecution Sir Richard’s daughter had suffered rather than wake him from his dream of happiness. He explained the conspiracy with Felix Dent, and how, through Jane Hunter, Ruth’s terrors had been awakened by the supposition that her step-mother was slowly poisoning her in order to get possession of her fortune.

With many exclamations of agony, the old Baronet listened to the terrible story; but when Jack had finished he lay silent for a time, and then he faltered,—

“Jack, I have not understood these attacks that

I have had lately, myself. Saunders told me that they were part of my old complaint, but I recognized no similarity in the symptoms. Rathbone, this woman nursed me with the utmost devotion, but we know now that she must have longed to be rid of me. What do you think? Can she have been trying to blind every one, so that in the event of—my death—no suspicion might attach to her? ”

Jack bent over the trembling old man.

“Sir Richard,” he said, solemnly, “we cannot tell. We shall never know the truth of that, and perhaps it is as well we should not, since this guilty pair have paid the penalty of their wrongdoing!”

So long a silence followed this that Jack fancied the invalid, worn out by agitation, had fallen into an exhausted sleep, and he was about to leave the bedside to consult the doctor, when he saw that Sir Richard’s eyes were open, and that there was an expression of stern, dogged resolution in them which filled him with surprise.

“One minute, Rathbone,” he said in a stronger

tone ; “I want you to do me a service. Go to those two men downstairs and tell them what I say, and then speak to the servants. Tell them that if they wish to retain my friendship they must never speak in my presence of the woman that was my wife ! Let me forget her if I can.”

“I will do what you ask me, sir,” Jack replied, earnestly ; “but is there nothing else ? Sir Richard, to-morrow is the first day of the New Year. Is there nothing else you have to say to me ? ”

Sir Richard covered his eyes.

“What can I say to you ? ” he cried. “John Rathbone, you know what is in my heart ! Tell Ruth I am not worthy of her forgiveness—that I daren’t ask her to come to me, but that I pray God to bless her and to pardon me ! ”

With a thankful heart Jack rejoined the two professional men, who were sitting with very downcast and depressed faces.

But though in much humiliation, they admitted how completely they had been hoodwinked ; neither of the two gentlemen appeared inclined to credit

the supposition of poison in Sir Richard's case at least; and at length the discomfited lawyer exclaimed, somewhat peevishly,—

“Hang it all, Rathbone! don't pile up the agony, for mercy's sake! Leave the wretched couple the benefit of that doubt, at any rate. Really, there's no evidence of poison. Now come, Saunders, is there?”

“I think not, certainly,” Dr. Saunders replied, very uneasily. “The symptoms can be accounted for quite naturally, as I have said all along.”

The two elderly men were still trying to bolster up each other's confidence when Best, the detective, was announced. He looked quickly from Jack to his companions, and the young man going to him, whispered,—

“They don't know about the bigamy, and they need not know it. Everything else you can speak out before them.”

Advancing to the table, Best laid upon it a heavy parcel enveloped in brown paper.

“It is the jewel-case,” he said, curtly.

Jack uttered an exclamation.

"We found that at the first cast of the drags," Best continued. "Also the woman's fur cloak."

Jack shuddered.

"And have you found——?"

"We have found him, ten yards from the shore, but not her."

"And have you done anything about the milk?" Jack asked, with a glance at Dr. Saunders' shocked face.

"Poisoned!" Best replied, laconically. "You shall have the analyst's report to-morrow. He says a third of that tumbler would have been sufficient to kill. Now, good-evening to you, gentlemen."

For five minutes the three men did not utter a word, and then Mackintyre rose.

"I tell you what it is, Rathbone," he said, excitedly. "You must get that old man out of the country while this thing blows over a bit. Saunders, could he take a voyage?"

"I don't know, I am sure," the mortified Dr. Saunders replied, faintly. "I believe, though, it would do him good."

"Oh, well, if there's any doubt about it, let us

have another opinion. You delay your starting a bit, Rathbone, and if you can, take him and Ruth to Australia, they would be out of the way of gossip. When they come back nobody need ever speak of this awful business again. You may depend upon Saunders and me trying to hush it up."

* * * * *

The next morning there was rejoicing among the servants at 'The Lodge,' though, in consideration of the horrible occurrences that had just taken place, this spirit of rejoicing was rigidly kept down. But Mrs. Evans, the old cook, could not altogether subdue her emotion, and told Brown in confidence that she for one thought things had turned out for the best in the end, for that the master would get well now Miss Ruth had come back to him, and that they might even hope for the good old days again—the old days before that wretched, abandoned woman came to blight every one's happiness.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in her father's darkened room, Ruth sat by the bedside, with her cheek resting upon his pillow, holding one of his hands, while with the other the old man tenderly stroked his daughter's pale, thin face.

CHAPTER XIII.

NINE months later, on a glorious evening in September, Jack Rathbone and Ruth were wandering together in the garden of 'The Lodge.' The sun was setting, and the warm radiance of the sky was reflected in their happy faces. Presently Jack stopped, and placing his arm round Ruth, said with a smile,—

"Ruth, it is very beautiful here! I am afraid you won't want to leave it again so soon!"

She looked up at him in surprise.

"Why, Jack," she said, lovingly, "how can you be so foolish? I shall leave it without one regret, for I know father will be quite content with the Bartrams, and we shall come back again."

"As soon as you like, Ruth," the young man answered. "I don't want to be selfish, my dear!"

Ruth walked a few steps, until they were concealed from view by the closely-growing shrubs, and then she lifted her sweet face for her lover's kiss.

"I am going to be selfish, this time," she murmured. "We will not come back very soon. Oh, dear love, I must have you all to myself for a little while! Jack, I can scarcely believe in my happiness yet! It all seems like a dream! Well, if it is a dream, I pray God that I may never wake from it!"

Only that morning Ruth and her father had returned to their home, and now, within three weeks, she and Jack were to be married. By the advice of the physician whom Dr. Saunders had insisted should be called in, the old Baronet, so weak that he had to be carried on board the steamer, had started for the Antipodes with his daughter and her lover, and Brown, the faithful valet, ten days after his reconciliation with Ruth; leaving George Bartram and his daughter in nominal charge of 'The Lodge' until their return.

Even before the end of the voyage it would have been difficult to recognize in the father and daughter

the two pale invalids who had embarked only five weeks before ; and the silver threads in Jack's fair hair remained as the only outward sign of the terrible troubles they had undergone.

They remained for six months in Australia, and then, benefited and invigorated in mind and body, they turned their faces homewards, Jack having disposed of his shares in the now flourishing Millbank gold mine at a splendid profit.

The lovers lingered until the river gleamed under the rays of the setting sun like a sea of liquid gold, and then Ruth, with a smile and a half-regretful sigh, reminded Jack it was their duty to rejoin the rest of the party.

They were only half-way up the shrubbery, however, when they stopped, and exchanged glances of great satisfaction fraught with meaning.

Entering the shrubbery at the other end were Felix Dent and Kate Bartram, talking together so earnestly that they evidently were not aware of the other two, who watched them with such sympathetic and friendly interest.

Kate was well but simply dressed, Ruth having

insisted that, until their return at least, Bartram should make no effort to seek employment, but should consent to remain with his daughter as Sir Richard's honoured guest.

Wholesome food and cheerful, healthy surroundings had worked a marvellous change in both father and daughter, and Jack Rathbone could quite understand the admiration expressed in Felix Dent's face, for the soft-eyed, intelligent-looking girl by his side, whose figure, no longer stooping and narrow-chested, had rounded and developed into hitherto unsuspected lines of grace and beauty.

Kate was the first to perceive the silent couple. With a blush she ran forward to meet them.

"It is such a lovely evening!" she exclaimed, "Mr. Dent was proposing a row on the river. What do you say, Miss Forrest?"

"You are falling into that bad old habit again, Kate!" Ruth said, merrily. "I won't answer you when you call me Miss Forrest!"

"Well, then," said Kate, with a smile, which caused Felix Dent a sensation of actual jealousy, "will you come on the river, Ruth?"

“Of course I will, gladly ; but how about the two fathers, Kate ? ”

“They are in the library together. Ruth, you can’t tell what that library has been to my father while you have been away. I believe he has been perfectly happy for the first time in his life. He has a profound reverence for Sir Richard too. When we came out just now, he looked in the seventh heaven of bliss. Your father was reading out loud to him from a great big book of notes.”

Ruth’s expression was a little enigmatical to Kate, but Jack quite understood the humorous twinkle in her eyes as she said, cheerfully,—

“Come along, then, Kate ; let us get our wraps. It will be a little cool on the water. If your father is happy I am quite certain mine is. I don’t believe he has read his notes to any one before. Tell your father so, and that mine has honoured him beyond any one else in this world ! ”

Left to themselves, the two young men wended their way slowly to the water’s edge.

“ Well, Dent ! ” Jack cried, heartily. “ I needn’t

ask how you are, old fellow; you look thoroughly 'fit,' and if I didn't know it was impossible, I should say you had grown! How goes business, eh?"

"Capitally," Dent replied. "My salary has been more than doubled at the bank. I was able to be of some use in an emergency; I suppose that's why they did it."

"Yes, I imagine they had some good reason!" Jack said, with a laugh; "and how's the mother?"

"Well too, thank God! I left her yesterday."

"Indeed?"

"Yes; I had something to tell her. I came back to be here to welcome you. By-the-way, mother has had a comfortable annuity left her."

"I congratulate you!" said Jack, warmly. "That makes your circumstances still easier, doesn't it?"

"Why, yes. She says she won't accept any further help from me. I am worth about four hundred a year now. It's not much, certainly, but——"

"It's enough, my boy!" Jack answered, meaningly; "quite enough for a start. Now tell me any other news, Dent. You know we didn't study the English papers while we were away. We were afraid of the Baronet's coming across anything to remind him of that awful business. Was that wretched woman's body ever found?"

"Never, fortunately," Dent replied.

"Why fortunately?"

"Don't you see, there would have been a dreadful difficulty about the funeral? We couldn't have let her be buried as Lady Forrest."

Jack nodded gravely.

"And Jane Hunter, who Kate believes to have been Hubert Mallet's sister — has anything been heard of her?"

"Nothing," Dent answered; "but Sir Richard's purse, which was missing, and which we all conclude she took from his dressing-table after discovering the flight of her accomplices, has been found in a field near N—— Station."

They walked on again, but before Jack could stoop to make some arrangements in one of the

boats Felix, with a nervous glance over his shoulder, whispered,—

“There is one other piece of news which I don’t want to mention before Miss Forrest. She’ll know it some day, no doubt; but Kate—Miss Bartram and I agreed it would be as well to keep it from her as long as possible. It will be a shock to her, and she has had too many shocks already.”

Jack raised his eyebrows in some alarm, and Dent continued,—

“Old Sydney Pratt, the picture-dealer, has been murdered!”

“Good Heavens!”

“You remember what Miss Forrest told us about his scapegoat, who signed the pictures and took the responsibility of the frauds?”

“Yes; of course I do.”

“Well, that man was charged at length, and sent to prison for three months. It was an understood thing that Pratt was to provide for his wife and children during his incarceration; but the old hypocrite was false in that as in everything else! When the man came out of prison he found his

family in the workhouse, where they had been taken, dying of want! It is supposed that this turned his brain; at any rate, he spent his last farthing on a revolver, and the next morning he and old Pratt were discovered lying side by side in the office at the back of the shop, dead!"

"And the wife and children?"

"They are dead too!"

Jack heaved a sigh, and then his face brightened as the sound of merry voices could be heard approaching.

"Here are the girls," he said. "Not a word of what we have been saying before them, Dent. Now then, old fellow, are we to have one boat or two?"

"Two, decidedly!" the young man answered, so promptly that Jack broke out into a hearty roar of laughter.

The moon had risen when Jack and Ruth returned to the shore. They saw the other boat a quarter of a mile off, and they seated themselves on the rustic seat to await the coming of the others.

Felix jumped ashore the first, but even when Kate had joined him, and they stood together on the grassy bank, it seemed as though she hung back nervously. Presently Felix stooped and whispered a few words in her ear, and then she raised her head bravely, and Ruth saw that tears and smiles were struggling for the mastery in her sensitive face.

Pressing Jack's hand, Ruth rose impulsively, and walked a few steps to meet them ; and then, without a word, she held out her arms to her friend, and Kate, running to her, hid her blushing face upon her shoulder, while the two men silently clasped each other's hands, and Dent said,—

“She is going to trust herself to me, Jack, and I think she will be safe. With her by my side, I shall not be so afraid of myself. I told my old mother the truth yesterday. It was the hardest struggle I ever had in my life, but I felt, with such a burden as that upon my conscience, I had no right to ask Kate to be my wife ! ”

“And after that, Mr. Rathbone, ought he to doubt his own strength ? ” Kate interrupted.

tenderly. "He won a victory over himself, then ; and since his mother loves him the better for this victory, and is proud of him, I need not be ashamed of following her example—need I ?"

* * * * *

That night, when the young men had departed, and all had retired except themselves, Ruth sat in the library on a low stool at her father's feet, leaning her head against him. There was quite a healthy glow in the Baronet's cheek, and his eyes shone with a most unwonted brightness as he addressed his daughter,—

"I am delighted at what you tell me, Ruth !" he cried. "I fancied there was something in the wind. Felix and Kate were so very silent this evening. I am more pleased than I can say. This marriage will give me an opportunity of doing what I want to do."

"And what's that, father ?"

"I shall settle five thousand pounds on that girl on her wedding-day. I must make some return to them for what they've done for you, my dear, and Bartram's as proud as possible. He's a capital

fellow, though, and a markedly intelligent man. If those other two are married on the same day as you are, I shall make Bartram stay with me here until you come back. I am sure he won't refuse when I ask it as a favour ; and he's given me some capital new ideas, I can tell you ! It's a real pleasure to talk to such a man ! ”

Ruth laid her cheek lovingly against her father's hand.

“ I am so glad, dear ! ” she said softly. “ I shall be happy about you now, but I don't think Kate will accept the money, for all that.”

“ But why not ? ”

“ I don't know, but I fancy she would be happier to be dependent on Felix, and he is so proud of the trust she is placing in him. As for Bartram, he is bound to return to his trade in the end. He would never submit to be kept by any one, and I respect him for it.”

“ And so do I ! ” the Baronet cried. “ Well, Ruth ; then I shall have to leave the money to Kate ! ”

“ Oh, father ! ” Ruth said, wincing at his words ;

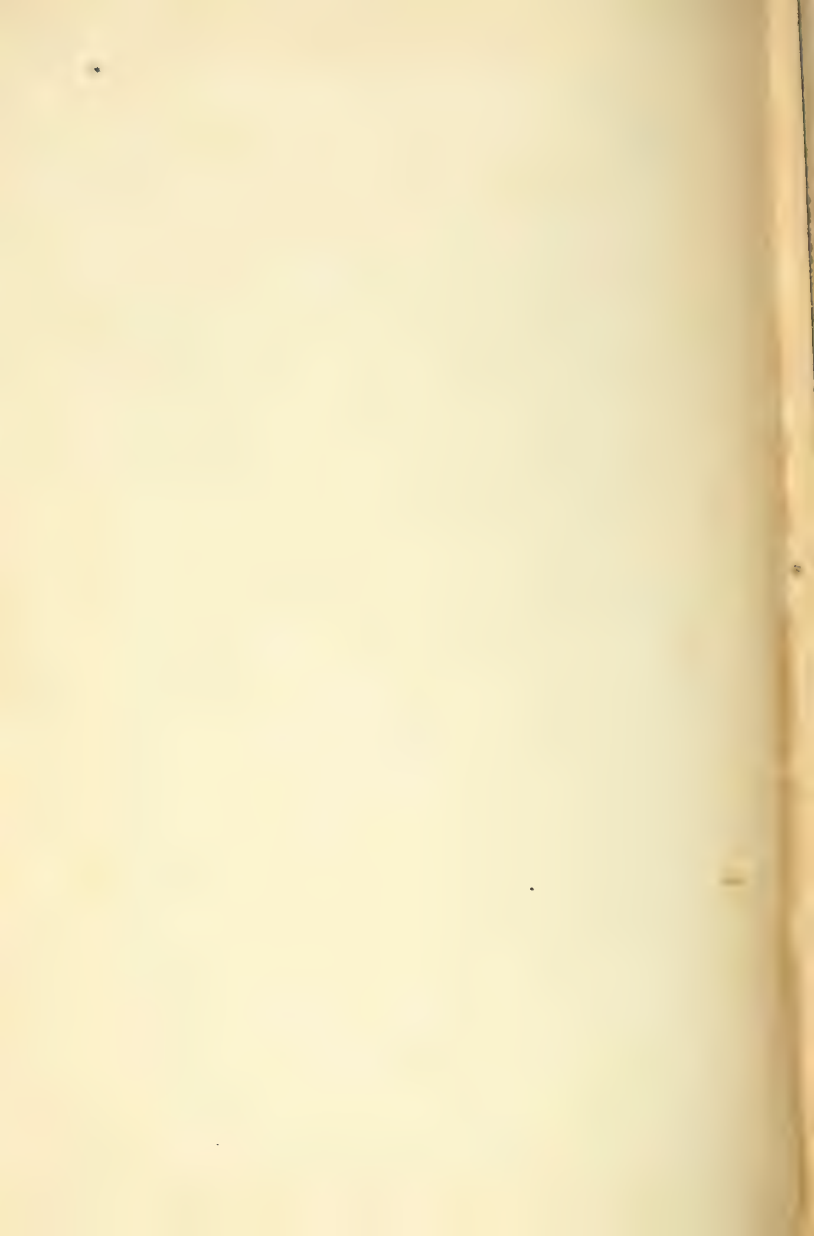
“don’t talk like that! Why, you are so well and strong now, you may live another thirty years!”

The Baronet laughed gently.

“I should be ninety-three then, darling! That’s not very likely! But, thank God! if I lived to a hundred I am not afraid that my daughter would tire of me! Kiss me, Ruth, and may God bless you, and make you and Jack as happy as you both deserve to be!”

THE END.





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